

General Issue Disclaimer-y thing: Harry Potter is not mine. I was heartbroken when my lawyer informed me of this, but dem's da breaks. Harry Potter's friends aren't mine, nor are Hogwarts, wands, magic, Diagon Alley, Hogsmead, Tom Marvolo Riddlet—known aliases include Dark Lord, Lord Voldemort, You-Know-Who, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and I-Have-More-Hyphens-In-My-Name-Than-The-Bloody-Boy-Who-Will-Not-Die...

Author pauses to reflect. *Sigh*, I don't own anything recognizable from the books. I do own those things not in the books that are not to property of other persons, real, dead, or imagined, but I stand to make no profits on them. If I did stand to make a profit do you really think you would be reading them here?

The Cards have been dealt again, and new player sits at the table, but the game remains the same.

Incipit Liber Primus

Chapter 1: At the Zoo

Someone told me it's all happening at the zoo
-Paul Simon

Bob cracked an eye open and looked around. He'd just eaten the week before, a nice young buck rabbit, feisty, but tender, and if he no longer felt swollen from the meal he didn't feel hungry either. His yard, or so he thought of it, was all in its proper place. The plants were green, the branches sturdy, the stone floor was clean. He opened his other eye and checked his pool which was fed by a small trickling waterfall and drained by a little black device that tugged pleasingly on the scales when he chose to bathe. Yard check complete he shifted his bulk slightly so that the Great Light in his yard would warm a patch of scale that had been blocked a moment earlier. The back of his neck tickled slightly, but that was to be expected since he was about due for a shed.

He closed his eyes once more and went back to basking, ignoring the movement of the furless, pink-skinned, ape-like things outside in their oddly-colored coverings. Bob—all the exciting animals have names that are picked from write-in contests or chosen by Zoo directors because they are exciting or exotic; but no one cares about reptiles and amphibians except their caretakers who are an

unimaginative lot, and 'Bob' is only one letter that is once removed from 'Boa', which explains why there are more boa constrictors named Bob in all the zoos of the world than there are lions named for Disney movie characters and tigers named for Rudyard Kipling characters and elephants named Dumbo (especially elephants named Dumbo) in those same zoos—wasn't certain the purpose of those coverings because there were a couple of Residents (which was how he thought of the Zoo's permanent staff as opposed to the migratory furless, pink-skinned, ape-like things) who never seemed to be able to keep them on once the migratory flocks had left.

Thud, Thud, Thud.

Bob sighed a snake-like sigh. The migrants weren't supposed to pound on his window, but that never seemed to stop them. Honestly, what did he ever do to them? Did he go pound on their windows when they were trying to nap? No. So why did they have to pound on his? He contemplated moving, but there weren't really enough plants to hide him and he didn't feel like climbing up to his branch, besides which, neither was as nice and warm as his rock and if he did move it'd likely only encourage the sschysss—it was the closest he could approximate of a word that the newest Resident of the reptile house had taught him; Bob wasn't certain what it meant, but it seemed to have something to do with excrement and in any case was much easier for him to pronounce than the other sound the Residents used to for excrement (though he did note that the Residents also seemed to use it for things other than excrement). Why someone would go to the bother of coming up with sounds to convey the meaning of excrement was beyond him (Bob was clever for a snake, but not particularly curious, and in any case cleverness only goes so far in snakes), but he was happy to admit that it had some uses.

THUD, THUD, THUD.

The boa constrictor tucked its head under a coil. 'Go away idiot man-child or I shall have Karait visit you one night' Bob hissed darkly. He wouldn't of course, Karait—the common krait was given a name by Kipling and is thus one of the exceptions to the dull names given by the reptile Residents—was as secure inside his home as Bob was in his. Besides, it was unlikely the migratory human—he had to think the sound since it wasn't one anything like he was capable of producing—understood what he was saying.

Idiot migrant-human suitably threatened, Bob turned to one of his favorite pastimes, dreaming of Brazil. He had never actually been to Brazil, he was what the Residents called 'Captive Bred' which meant, as near as he could tell, that he'd been born in London instead of Brazil. What Bob did have were first, one of the Residents that had cared for his mother was fond of listening to other humans (not migrants, but not residents either) talk about far-off places, and when he wasn't listening to people talk about them he was reading about them, frequently out loud. It was through this Resident that he'd learned about Sahara (delightfully hot if unpleasantly dry), India (a fun place to visit), Antarctica (proof that Hell exists, to a snake's way of thinking), and Brazil.

Hot, tropical Brazil. Where there were places to hide, a thousand and one new mammals and birds to sample, sunlight in abundance, things to rub against to sooth the maddening itch of shedding scales. And above all, no furless, pink-skinned, ape-like things pounding on the side of his home.

Heaven.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

Bob was startled out of sunny skies and humid air of Brazil and found himself back on his rock. Most of the sshyssiss (which was how he did a plural) contented themselves with rapping lightly, but repeatedly. Very few actually reached the 'wham' stage. He could hear the sshysss complaining about something, but its complaints were growing quieter which meant the migratory-sshysss was finally moving on.

He poked his head up and opened an eye. A migratory human was standing a respectful distance from his window, not slamming on it, not even leaning and leaving paw-prints on it. It was wearing some type of device on its face (a sizeable number of the migratory furless, pink-skinned, ape-like humans did), and its strange coverings were less colorful than most wore and hung oddly.

After a while without the human saying or doing anything, Bob decided to try something new. He would try interacting with one of the migratory humans. He suspected it wasn't very smart, else it would be one of the Residents who seemed frightfully intelligent and

could converse at length about places like Africa (of which the Sahara seemed to be part of, but included places that sounded almost as nice as Brazil) and others that he'd never heard of. Once the decision to interact with it had been made he was faced with a problem. How did one interact with a migratory human? The Residents seemed able to understand Bob and the other inhabitants somewhat, though none of the other snakes, or even the lizards, could report a Resident carrying on a meaningful conversation.

Giving a snake-like shrug (which involves more head and less shoulder) he turned to the migratory furless, pink-skinned, ape-like thing and winked.

It quite clearly started, sort of like the look the rabbit gave him in the moment between him dropping from the branch above it and the strike. Progress was clearly being made. Perhaps there was hope for these migratory humans after all. Bob looked at where the short fat human was waddling away with the tall fat human, looked back at the human standing in front of his yard, and then, in a decidedly over-the-top gesture, rolled his eyes before saying: 'I get that all the time.'

'I know,' the human said in a voice that was so quiet that Bob was scare sure that he had heard the human speak, which was when he did it again. 'It must be really annoying.'

Bob nodded in ecstatic agreement. He'd made contact with a migrant, and not just any migrant, one capable of actually conversing. Oh, the words weren't quite right, they were odd, stilted, with sibilants in odd places. Tex was sort of like that, he was a diamond-back rattlesnake from across the pond who disdained being called a yank—he tended to drawl his sibilants and had an accent that might as well be its own language. Only what this human used was rigid, rather than a relaxed drawl.

'Where do you come from, anyway?' the human asked.

Bob flicked his tail at the sign that the migratory humans liked to read aloud.

'Boa Constrictor, lat. Boa Constrictor, Brazil,' the human read aloud. "Brazil," it made the sound humans used because they couldn't properly hiss Brazil. 'Was it nice there?'

Bob flipped his tail at the sign again.

'Oh, I see—so you've never been to Brazil?'

Bob shook his head and was about to say more when the skinny migratory human that looked sort of like a rat he'd eaten a couple of months before, started shouting. The short fat one waddled over and attacked the human he'd been talking to.

A moment later his entire window vanished. He'd seen them replaced before, and once one of the semi-residential humans that did work on the yard of the migratory humans, had accidentally broken the window of Tom, Dick, and Harry's (the chameleons) yard. But to simply vanish, one moment there and gone the next?

Bob gathered his coils together. He didn't know how or why (didn't really care for that matter) the glass had vanished. Only that it had. With no window he was free to explore the world for himself. Maybe not the Sahara and definitely not Antarctica, but there was still India and above all, Brazil.

Brazil. Home first, vacation later.

He darted between the two migratory humans with all the speed of a killing strike. He was well-rested, full of energy from his rock and the rabbit he'd had the week before, and wasn't weighed down by the digesting mass like he had been in the middle of the week.

'Brazil, here I come,' he called as he flowed out of his yard. It was dark and cool inside of the human's yard, but he quickly realized that their yard was actually a hide and that the yard itself was right through those open things at the far end of the room.

Harry Potter could only watch as the boa constrictor snapped playfully at Dudley's heels, and then went slithering towards the doors of the Reptile House. As it passed him it turned to him, and Harry distinctly heard it hiss: 'Thankss, amigo.'

Harry barely managed to stutter "you're welcome," before a hand fixed itself around his upper arm and pulled him to one side of the crowd that was forming as people pressed out of the way of the escaping constrictor. He had had a number of hands grab his arms

since he had come to live at the Dursley's, from his Uncle Vernon's ham-like paws to his Aunt Petunia's thin, cold, spidery, fingers. This hand was different, smallish yet firm without being painful.

"What are you crazy?" a distinctly female voice hissed at in his ear. "You can't do that in plain sight! Are you trying to bring trouble down on yourself?"

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In Scotland, perched on a cliff above a lake with broad sweeping grounds that abutted a grim and ancient forest all of which were hemmed by craggy mountains, was a castle. This was no ordinary castle, but a magical castle. Inside the highest room of the third tallest tower (the Astronomy Tower and the Headmaster's Tower being the first and second tallest respectively, though there were persistent rumors that one of the towers that had no entrances was perhaps taller than either and perhaps even taller than both) was the personal scrying room of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry's Divination Professor, one Sybill Trelawney.

On this particular day Sybill had her size 6 crystal ball in its silver holder placed at the center of her circular work table, which was itself placed in the center of her work room. Covering the table was a black silk cloth that was heavily embroidered with mystic runes and symbols. A tidy little stack of cards rested by where her left hand naturally came to rest when she sat at the table as she was doing now.

Sybill took up the cards, shuffled them once, cut twice, and then placed them on the spot she had taken them from. Immediately the stack slid over so that each card had a portion of its back exposed as they lay in a straight line before her. After a moment a single card pushed its way out of the others. With a shaking hand she picked up the card and turned it over.

"The High Priestess, secret or arcane knowledge," she murmured, then replaced the card, swept up the deck, shuffled twice and cut once. This time, instead of replacing the deck, she swept the cards out into a single line as they had fallen before. As one they flipped over, revealing themselves, and then they began to move.

First one, then another, and then another, until with an increasing frenzy cards were sliding up or down, displaying figures right-side-up or inverted.

"Stop!" Sybill shrieked. The cards froze, then all returned to their tidy little line. She took a breath, half released it, and then breathed a word into the room. "Who."

The Fool and Death cards of the Major Arcana slid up, and then the King of Wands slid down, inverting itself.

"The Fool begins his quest, Death, change, he will grow," Sybill muttered to herself. "King of Wands inverted—the Dark Lord," she gasped. The King of Wands and the Fool both retracted, but Death stayed exposed until she voiced, "When."

Two cards slid out instantly as Death retracted, Wheel of Fortune and the Seventh of Cups.

"Seventh Cups," Sybill muttered, "confusion, unable to decide or make a choice. Future?"

Both cards slid down, replaced by the High Priestess.

"The guardian of knowledge again?" she asked in confusion. "What is going on?"

Death grinned back at her.

"A change? A change in what?"

The Wheel of Fortune emerged again.

Sybill glared at her cards as though they had betrayed her. "You want me, Sybill Trelawney, Divination Professor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, to guess?" The card inverted itself. "No? What is the answer you all-encompassing piece of..." she stopped as the card slid back into place. "All-encompassing," she mused. "Everything has changed."

High Priestess, inverted.

"Knowledge that is guarded, that is being kept—no," she caught herself. "The future has changed." Sybill's eyes blazed behind her thick glasses. "Someone has disrupted the flows of Time itself!" she shrieked upstarting, her chair falling back behind her as she stood. "How am I to know what will happen tomorrow?" she demanded the empty room as she strode around it in a blind panic. "My students will be expecting—Worse, Minerva will be insufferable. How could this have happened? Who could have even done it? Certainly not some Ministry hack with a time-turner."

She turned back to glare balefully at her cards, but stopped when she saw that six had pushed themselves free. No, seven. The four queens, Death again, and the Magician seemed stuck to the Fool inverted.

Sybill contemplated that arrangement for a moment, then went and fixed her tea things, adding a particularly strong medicinal belt to her teacup once the tea had been poured, and then another, and then...

"Four women plus whoever the Fool—and so very aptly named that one—is, changed the timeline. They did it so totally that I can't tell who is going to die tomorrow," she said with a calm that comes with four medicinal belts. "For all I know tomorrow doesn't exist, and I can't say I want to know how they managed to do that. So instead please tell me why they thought this was a good idea."

Chariot inverted, Justice inverted, Tower, Fifth of Pentacles, Seven of Wands, World inverted.

"The Chariot could be any number of things," Sybill muttered. "Justice, a world out of balance. Tower, sudden knowledge a sudden change not for the better. Fifth of Pentacles, a low point, ill luck. Seven of Wands...the siege card?" She frowned. "A losing battle, one that put the entire world at risk?"

She paled abruptly. "No, not a battle, a war."

Some tea found its way into a cup that was already rather full with sherry. "What nonsense," she muttered. "No war could go so badly that it'd make sense to nearly destroy everything. In fact, it did destroy everything just not yet."

The Ten of Swords peeked out at her which caused her to abruptly stop muttering. "So it's not as bad as I thought, it was worse."

Sybill snorted into her sherry. "What nonsense," she repeated. "Show me the Dursleys."

The inverted Empress, expected though not particularly welcome, would be the Aunt. She had never met the muggle sister of Lily Potter, had only ever met Lily once, actually, and her husband not at all, but Minerva's descriptions of the family the one day she had spent observing them were more than sufficient to explain the card, just like the Page of Wands (inverted) was her boy and the husband was reflected by alternating Kings of Cups and Pentacles—this time the former. But there was no sign of Harry.

Sybill leaned forward in her chair. Only rarely had she ever seen Harry absent from the Dursleys. "Harry Potter."

The cards seemed to shake, stirred by an unseen wind, and then the Magician slowly pushed its way free.

Sybill dropped back in her chair. In all of her readings one Harry Potter had always been the hardest to pin a signifier on. He cycled through all of the pages with depressing frequency, and often appeared as the Fool from the high arcana. It wasn't uncommon for a person to have several cards they closely aligned with. The elder Dursley, for example, appeared as two different kings and even the devil—which suggested excessive self-indulgence on his part—more than merely occasionally. Of course, having multiple signifiers, and especially more than two or three, was something more commonly seen among the very young. But Harry didn't stop at three or four, for the past ten years (and increasingly so in the last three), cards like the Hermit and the Hanged Man had been showing up in her readings, often with the High Priestess nearby.

The Magician, though, was a card she had never seen representing him, and once more the High Priestess emerged from the line of cards, followed by Death.

She frowned, that card had been showing itself far too often for her taste. A little change was all well and good, but it made her job so much harder to do. On the other hand, the High Priestess confirmed the Magician which meant Harry Potter finally knew about magic.

"Show me what has caused things to change."

All the cards retreated except for Death.

Sybill Trelawney swept up the other cards and placed them in a tidy little stack, then picked up the last card.

Nothing.

Sighing, she stood up, but as she did so one finger brushed against the crystal ball and her world convulsed.

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She found herself standing on a platform guarded by wrought iron railings overlooking the unmistakable city of Paris. But this wasn't the Paris she knew, nor was it the city of her youth. This Paris was a fire-blasted shell of its former glory. Fires burned with the sweet stench of burning pork. Buildings were reduced to rubble through which people moved. Some of them were digging out other people, others searched the ruins for clothing and food and other things needed for survival. While this was going on there were more people fighting. Some of them were wizards—the flash of spell-fire unmistakable—while others wielded clumsy-looking muggle weapons, against which there were other wizards and things that shouldn't exist in the darkest of nightmares.

"You shouldn't be here."

The world stilled. Spells hung in the air below where she stood like colorful faerie lights. There was no sound, it, like the spells and the people below, had fallen still. Sybill turned to find a young woman, scarcely more than a teen, staring at her. Her skin was pale and sunken, her hair raven-black and her robes little more than spun shadows that billowed around her so that the only part of her that seemed real was her face.

It took Sybill a moment to realize that the woman wasn't looking at her, wasn't addressing her, but was, in fact, looking at someone behind her. She turned around, but Paris was gone and she found herself sitting down to a pleasant-looking lunch at some kind of open-aired restaurant that was perched on top of a building.

...has come to Earth

The sun was high overhead, and instead of the chill of Hogwarts she was immersed in a bone-deep warmth that seemed to penetrate to the core of her being. The sky was like crystal, marred only by fluffy white clouds. Below where she sat there was a beach, and beyond that an invitingly blue ocean. And somewhere there was music playing so softly that she was only barely able to make out the words.

Shrouded in a mushroom cloud of death
Death comes in a blinding flash
Of hellish heat and leaves a smear of ash
And the sun has—

The world twisted again, and when she was able to blink her eyes she found herself standing in muggle London. She wasn't sure where, it was a large paved plaza with a column in the center that ended in a jagged spike where it had been snapped thirty seven feet above the ground, while two nearby fountains (one looked intact while the other was shattered) were both bone dry.

When nothing happened Sybill took a hesitant step. The world rippled. Weeds and grass burst from between the paving stones. The shattered fountain began to gush forth blood. Everywhere she looked there were bodies, not whole bodies, but the skeletons that were all that was left after soft tissue had decomposed. Some still had scraps of cloth or leather, all that remained of their clothes, but mostly it was just heaps of bone. People hadn't just died in the square, they had been ripped apart into very tiny pieces, and some of the bones looked like they had been gnawed on. The sky above her was dark with clouds that roiled and boiled, and lightning flashed angrily but there was no rain.

"What happened here?" she asked, caught in the vision and wondering just which question this was trying to answer.

The world shifted again. The same square, but the column was whole with some man in a muggle uniform perched on top, and the fountains flung water into the air. Everywhere people hurried. They wore dark clothing and didn't look at each other, reminding Sybil of the dark years when Voldemort lurked unchecked and terrible. It

took her a moment to realize that they weren't passing through the square, but they were leaving it. Many up the steps of a large stone building on one side of the square, but others were hurrying down streets or into passages that lead somewhere underground.

"Do you remember Paris?"

Sybil turned. Standing in the midst of the panicked muggles were two figures who weren't moving. One was the woman she had seen on the Eiffel Tower. Her robes still swirled, but they were real, not conjured shadows, and she clasped a metal-shod staff capped with a gem that was larger than Sybill's fist. The man standing next to the woman was about the same age though it was hard to be certain. He wore war robes, had long, messy hair that was gathered into a tail by a piece of leather at the nape of his neck, and like his companion carried a staff, though unlike her he also wore a sword belted at his side.

"Of course I remember Paris," the woman said. She gave the man a look, "Why?"

The man smiled and eyes the color of the killing curse blazed behind a fringe of raven-colored hair.

"Harry James Potter," a wizard said, striding out of the crowd of panicked muggles.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle," Harry said. He raised his staff and spoke a Word.

Sybill felt like someone was ripping out and intangible part of herself. Silence once more reigned supreme, unmarred by running feet or throats open in unvoiced screams. The world shuddered, and then a hole was ripped through, well, everything. One of the fountains was ruined and water turned to blood as it gushed past the hole in reality. A nothingness loomed through the hole, not a black void, not a white light, just...nothing. Then a great eye pressed itself against the hole, it was dozen of feet across and burned with reds and yellows and colors the human eye wasn't capable of seeing but that the mind interpreted of stark raving horror.

Things pushed through the void. Roughly human-sized but bent and misshapen with a multitude of crustacean and insect-like limbs that

had joints that swiveled instead of hinged, and double-jaws that hung from skull-like heads with dozens of eyes.

They tore through the living humans like a great white shark through chum, but they didn't cross into this world alone. There were tall, spindly things that coughed and spat acid. Hulking monstrosities that were taller than a double-decker bus and was covered in massive slabs of armor that reduced curses barely pitted. Long, centipede-like things with snake-like bodies, lobster-like claws, and a wide, jawless maw that was filled with hundreds of teeth.

Anti-apparition and anti-portkey wards snapped into place, and suddenly Lord Voldemort was trapped in the plaza with the creatures. And as Sybill watched, reality at the edge of the rift started to warp and buckle as it was sucked in. Monsters loosed into the world attacked indiscriminately. Muggle and wizard, vampire and werewolf, troll and giant. All were fair prize

Once more the world warped and once more Sybill found herself on the Eiffel Tower with the strange woman.

"I had to come."

Sybill turned to find once more the older version of Harry Potter standing behind her. He walked towards the woman, passing through the Divination Professor as though she didn't exist until he stood next to the woman and stared down at Paris.

"Did—"

"I got out what I could," Harry said in a dead-sounding voice as he watched the horror unfold below him. "Why?" he asked softly. "He won this time, why this?"

"Because he could?" the woman said. Time jumped and her voice continued, "Voldemort isn't going to spare them there is one last thing we can do for them."

"And what's that?" Harry asked bitterly. "Kill them first?"

"No, better," the woman smiled cruelly. "We can use them as bait." She began to explain.

As she spoke the scene shifted again, Paris was still in ruins with greater damage than before though the fires had mostly died out. Voldemort's minions, his army of trolls and giants, vampires and werewolves, the wizards and witches he could bribe, threaten, or seduce into his service squatted on the ruins of the once-gallant city. But in what were once the outskirts of the city, built centuries before to prevent what had happened with Cimetière des Saints-Innocents from happening again, were four great cemeteries, and in each of them bare earth began to tremble as gates of mausoleums creaked open and cover-stones shifted. Nor were these four alone affected. There were more than a dozen large cemeteries in Paris, including Les Invalides, the military cemetery, memorial, and museum. As the dark fell, silent figures once more fell into grim and ancient rank and files.

Beneath the streets, in a segment of the quarry that spanned less than two kilometers, disjointed skeletons began to reassemble themselves. They didn't take to the streets right away, but instead broke into the sections of the quarry that remained officially off-limits. Muggles shrank away in fright, or took off running if there was space to do so, but the dead paid them no heed.

It was an army of the dead, but they weren't the sentient or semi-sentient dead. They didn't care about the living, but they didn't not care either. They were totally and utterly indifferent to anything except their orders, and while they didn't care any more about their orders anymore than they cared about the mundanes in the catacombs, they would complete them.

Sybill gasped as the dead rose and tore into the living. A giant's foot could destroy a dozen skeletons, a wizard with the proper fire spell could incinerate a hundred or more. When the Cimetière des Saints-Innocents had been excavated it was estimated that more than 6 million skeletons had been exhumed and moved into the catacomb, and it hadn't been the only cemetery whose contents had been moved. She could only watch in horror as Paris, the City of Lights, was inundated by a tidal wave of the dead.

"I don't understand," Sybill whispered as the world twisted around her one more and she found herself back at the roof-top restaurant. "Is this the future, or only a possible future? Can I prevent this?"

A light like a thousand light-charms cast by Albus Dumbledore stabbed into her eyes a moment before a blast of hellish heat slammed into her. She shrieked as her eyes boiled inside their sockets, bursting and running down her face and leaving behind the after-image of Death grinning at her from a Tarot card, and still music gently played in the background.

Now the sun has disappeared
All is darkness, anger, pain and fear
Twisted, sightless wrecks of men
Go groping on their knees and cry in pain
And the sun has disappeared

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Albus Dumbledore watched as his enchanted quill signed his name with the expected flourish. Despite the fact that the quill was entirely propelled by magic his hand was twisted and cramped from the hours he'd already spent at his desk doing parchment work. Not for the first time he regretted ever agreeing to replace Armando Dippet. That was not to say that he didn't find his job rewarding. Of all of the posts he held Headmaster of Hogwarts was the one he cherished most. But if there was one regret that had come with the post is that there was far too much paperwork and far too little interaction with the students.

With a heavy sigh he folded the sheaf of parchment, slid it into the waiting envelope, and then reached for the stick of purple sealing wax. But barely had the wax been held over the flame of a candle than one of his many magical instruments began tooting like a hot tea kettle. Intrigued, he set aside the wax and stood, moving around his large desk to where the shelves of magical devices stood.

He checked the devices that monitored the blood wards on Number 4 Privet Drive and the tracking charms on Harry Potter first. All were normal. It was the magic detector that was monitoring Harry that had gone off first. He tapped it with his wand, and the result made him arch one eyebrow and rub his beard with a hand. So young Harry had encountered a witch, a young one, likely a muggleborn that had just produced her first accidental magic.

A double tap of his wand and a murmured incantation produced several tiny puffs of grey smoke. Yes, that was the likeliest

explanation. The witch clearly wasn't of age yet and her signature wasn't recorded in the Book in which the names (and magic signatures) of all Hogwarts students were inscribed. Besides, Harry was nearly eleven. By now he should have the rudimentary grasp on his abilities that most wizards and witches were capable of before starting Hogwarts. His Aunt would have explained how he needed to keep his magic secret, possibly the other contents of the letter he had left her as well. That Harry would actually meet someone magical before he started Hogwarts was unplanned, but hardly unexpected. In fact this wasn't the first time the particular combination of devices had alerted him, though in all of those cases the wizard of witch was known to him.

Still, a friend who shared the mysterious abilities known as 'magic' would probably do Harry well. That had always been the downside of placing Harry with the Dursleys. More than one muggleborn student had had numerous problems after being so radically separated from pre-Hogwarts friends, and one or two had displayed a remarked reluctance of ever forming any social connections to the rest of the student body afterwards.

Still, the location was the middle of the London Zoo. Most accidental magic that occurred in later years was due to stress such as some form of danger or perceived danger. Not that that was the case here, of course, if Harry had been in any danger at all no less than four different alarms would have sounded to alert him to that fact. But it begged the question of what, exactly, the burst of accidental magic had done.

Worry assuaged, Albus Dumbledore turned away from the magical instruments and started to return to his desk when the wards trembled around Hogwarts, and then an alert began hammering inside his head. It wasn't an attack alarm, but one that signaled a very serious magical accident in the highest room of the North Tower.

He turned to his right as Fawkes awoke with an irritated squawk, but still flung himself from his perch. Albus caught the phoenix's tail as it swept past, and then both disappeared in a flash of flame.

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Firenze looked up abruptly and stared at the sky as Hagrid talked about one of the students that had recently visited his cabin, and his own meeting with Harry Potter outside of Gringotts. The centaur tuned out his friend as he rapidly searched the day-lit sky. It was harder, the sun was so bright it washed out detail, the stars viewed in daylight were always so much less precise than those at night. Despite that he looked with all the ability his species was renown for, and all he found distressed him. Nothing was in its proper place. Something had changed. Something profound that upset the paths and motions of the intricate Dance of the Sphere.

No mere wizard or witch would see it, he knew. Muggles, with their sensitive telescopes so many more times powerful than the greatest instrument of glass and brass that the wizards could develop, and devices capable of seeing so much more than mere light, might be able to detect the changes. No doubt they would pass off the changes as a mistake, as so many of their kind did, and even if they did not it they were too rational. They could see the Truth—or at least that was the way the centaurs saw it—but their rational minds weren't capable of reading it. The wizards produced some people capable of Reading the stars, but they cloaked it with so much claptrap that when they did get the right reading it was invariably for the wrong reasons, and ability or no they didn't have their muggle counterparts' sensitive instruments or the Centaurs' own innate ability to keep track of all the heavenly bodies.

Now he Looked to the skies, and deep in the double human and equine hearts of his complex circulatory system, Firenze was afraid.

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Harry frowned as he looked at the person addressing him. A girl perhaps a year or two older than him glared down at him. Eyes the color of bright, primary-colored blue, shone out from black locks and pale skin; an old shirt advertising a Black Sabbath concert was mostly hidden by a fraying denim jacket, and equally frayed jeans were tucked into battered black boots. "Who are you?" he asked finally. "What are you talking about?"

"That!" she gestured angrily at the snake. "Do you think exhibit-glass just disappears on its own? The mundanes certainly won't! You can't just go throwing that type of thing around without drawing attention to yourself."

"I didn't do anything!" Harry protested, pulling away from the strange girl who had grabbed him. Or that was his plan. He didn't accomplish much.

"Of course you didn't," she snorted. "Listen here, little wizard, you can't just go throwing magic around in the mundane world without visiting a whole lot of trouble on a lot of people even if the stupid Ministry doesn't get involved."

"Magic? The Ministry? What are you talking about?" Harry asked. "Let me go!"

"What am I—" She shook her head. "A newbie, great. Fine, look, I'm, well, call me Allie." She grimaced. "Better than my real name anyway. Who are you?"

"Harry, Harry Potter," Harry said.

"Are you?" she asked, tilting her head to one side as her demeanor shifted from concerned to curious. "Are you really?"

"No, I'm Prince Harry, who else would I be?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"No need to be rude," she huffed, her other hand snaking forward to lift up the fringe of his hair.

"Hey!" Harry protested, jerking his head back. "Nothing to see, just a stupid scar, okay?"

"You're Harry Potter, and you came with them?" she nodded towards the Dursleys where Vernon was yelling and Dudley was squealing.

"Unfortunately," Harry muttered. "My aunt, uncle, and cousin—the skinny one is his friend, Piers Polkiss."

"Delightful," she said dryly and glanced at her watch before scanning the reptile house again. "Why are you with them of all people...and why are you dressed like that?"

Harry frowned, "It's not like I have much of a choice now, is it?" he shot back. It wasn't his fault that Aunt Petunia always made him wear Dudley's too-large cast-offs.

"There is always a choice, Harry," she said, giving him an odd look. "It's just a matter of recognizing them."

"So what, I could go with you?" Harry asked sarcastically.

She gave him a considering look before shrugging, "If you wanted."

"And your parents won't mind?" Harry snorted.

"My Mum's dead," she said bluntly. "Father-dearest is in prison—long may he rot there."

"Oh," Harry said. "I'm sorry, my—"

"Don't be sorry, nothing you could have done about it," she cut him off with a shake of her head. "And I know about your parents."

"You do?" Harry asked. "How?"

"Long story," she said. "And one we don't have time for right now." She looked at the Dursleys again, "We don't have much time, yes or no?"

"Yes or no, what?" Harry asked.

"Are you coming with me or not?" she asked impatiently.

"Oh," Harry glanced at the Dursleys. "With you," he decided.

"Good, let's motor," she said, moving her grip to his hand and pulling him through the crowd. "The first thing we have to do is get out of here, then we have to get you cleaned and—"

"I had a shower last night," Harry protested.

"Not that kind of clean," she said as they exited the reptile house. She glanced around, then took off down the walk. "Walk quickly but don't run; act like you know what you're doing and where you're going."

"I don't know what I'm doing," Harry muttered.

"Right now you're walking with your sister towards the front entrance where we're going to meet up with our parents," she whispered urgently after glancing around at the others walking by. "Keep that idea in our head and act like it!"

Harry nodded carefully. Clearly the girl was half-mad. He thought for a moment before deciding that half-mad was preferable to the Dursleys.

Apparently she had figured out what he was thinking because she gave an irritated little sigh. "I am not mad. Well, at least not all mad. People notice if you look lost or uncertain. If you know what you're doing, they're less likely to offer to help."

"What if you don't know what you're doing?" Harry asked.

"It doesn't matter, just so long as you don't let it show." She nodded towards a sign pointing giving directions to various parts of the zoo. "If you stop and look at it, someone will stop and ask if you're lost or need help. But a glance will tell us that the entrance is this way," she waved ahead of them, "and will also let those around us know, or at least think, that we know where we're going."

"And where is that?" Harry asked.

"My flat, for tonight at least," Allie said. "It's not much, but it's a roof, and it's warm," she said. "More importantly, we can talk there. Before we go there, however, we have to—"

"Get me clean first," Harry said.

Allie nodded.

"Why?" he asked, stopping abruptly. "If you're one of those weirdos who—"

"I'd hardly admit it, now would I?" she asked, cutting him off.

Harry hesitated. "I, er..."

She grinned broadly.

Harry flushed, as she chuckled, and then realized she wasn't laughing at him. Not the cruel laugh Dudley used when hunting him, at least, but a light, amused sound at his reaction to her. After a moment he let out a careful chuckle, and when she didn't react except to laugh harder he joined in.

Allie dragged him out of the way of the people that were walking around them. They collapse in the grass next to a building.

"Who are you?" Harry asked.

"Allie," she said with a smile. "I'm sort of notorious, you see. It's nice to be with just someone who knows me as Allie. I'm sure you understand."

"Um, no, actually," Harry said.

Allie looked at him puzzled. "I'd have thought with all the attention you get you'd be happy to be just Harry."

"Attention I get?" Harry asked. "From the Dursleys?"

"Not them," she said with a roll of her eyes. "Do you mean to say they didn't tell you anything?"

"Why should they?" Harry asked. "They have their precious Dinky Duddydums. Why would they waste their attention on me?" Allie stared at him for long seconds until he flinched and looked away. "Sorry," he whispered, "I didn't mean to upset you, maybe I should go back—"

"No," Allie said firmly. She reached over and grabbed his hand with her own. "You didn't upset me, Harry."

"But you—"

"Let me finish, please?" she asked.

Harry nodded.

"You didn't upset me, Harry, you surprised me," she said.

"Surprised you," he repeated flatly. "How is their ignoring me, when I'm lucky, surprising? You saw what they were like!"

"You'd be surprised," she said with a wane smile. She glanced around, "Do you think they'll notify security about you being missing?"

"They probably won't notice until Uncle Vernon wants to yell at me for something," Harry said. "And after that snake..."

"Yeah," she agreed.

He stood, "So...main entrance?"

She nodded and they resumed walking towards the entrance. "I, er, hope you don't think I'm rude, but..." he hesitated.

"Go ahead and ask, Harry," she said. "Worst that can happen is I'll choose not to answer if you get too personal."

"Okay, but...if your Mum's dead, who do you live with?"

"Myself, mainly," Allie said. "Mum's family is, was, fairly well-off, and there are some family friends I live with at times. I've also been in a program of individual study...sort of like a really old-fashioned apprenticeship. Sounds weird, doesn't it?"

"No, actually it sounds brilliant," Harry said. "I'm supposed to go to the local comprehensive this September. Dudley is going to be going to Smeltings."

Allie nodded politely.

"But if I'm going with you..." Harry hesitated.

Allie shook her head, "I'm afraid not."

"Then what am I supposed to do?" he asked.

Allie smiled, "Do you like surprises?"

"Not most of the ones I've gotten, no," Harry said.

"You'll like this one," Allie said. "Trust me."

"You're sure?" Harry asked.

Allie nodded as they neared the entrance. "Who doesn't want to be a hero?" she asked.

"A hero?"

"Uh-huh."

Harry hesitated, "maybe this isn't such a good idea." He pulled away from her. They were at a point where paths that led to different parts of the zoo met, and he looked at the guide signs.

"What if I can convince you that you're special?" she asked

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Look," she said, fishing a penny out of a pocket. "Normal, right?"

Harry nodded warily.

She made a fist and closed her eyes, her brow furling in concentration. After a moment she opened her eyes again and motioned Harry over to her.

Harry hesitated, but when he finally walked over to her she was offering him a cupped hand. Sitting in it was the penny, only now it was gently glowing. He looked at her for permission, and at her nod he picked it up. It was definitely producing its own light, though it was wan and feeble in the bright afternoon and as he watched it first dimmed...and then went out.

"How?" he asked.

She grinned. "Magic."

"And I can do that?" he asked in a soft, almost reverent, voice.

"That and more," she replied.

Harry nodded slowly. "Show me."

She gestured towards the entrance of the zoo as he handed the coin back to her. "Here's where it gets tricky. Pick a family that's leaving and follow them closely enough to look like you're with them, but not so close that they start asking questions. I'll go first, watch me, then do the same thing."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Because two kids leaving together without an adult are more noticeable than two families leaving, each with an extra kid," she explained before lengthening her stride.

Harry watched as she walked purposely towards the entrance, changing her stride to a stroll as she drew close to a family of five, the mother pushing a stroller ahead of her while her husband adjusted a camera bag. She strode past them through the gate, took five steps, then spun and looked archly at them. Or rather, she looked past them at Harry.

Harry shook his head and continued walking, looking around for a family to follow through. He spotted a family of three and managed to take two steps towards them before he accidentally bumped into someone.

He turned and froze as a tall, thin, woman that for a moment reminded him Petunia, stumbled. He leapt backwards just as it seemed as though she was going to trip over him when her husband caught her.

"Sorry, sorry ma'am," he blurted. "I didn't see you and—"

"Easy, easy," she smiled. "No harm done young man."

Harry hesitated, then ran to the door and pulled it open for her. "Really," he said earnestly. "I'm sorry, and—"

"It's okay," she laughed. "Where are your parents?"

Harry hesitated, "Dead," he said softly.

She froze, "I'm so sor—"

"It's okay," Harry shrugged. "You didn't know." He glanced at the underground entrance, "I have to go, my Aunt and Uncle—"

She nodded, "Go. I hope you enjoyed the zoo."

"Oh I did, it was lovely, Ma'am," he blurted, then turned and raced for the underground.

"Such a polite young boy..." he heard the woman say to her husband.

"You realize that she'll remember you, don't you?" Allie hissed, grabbing his arm as she led him down the steps into the underground station.

Harry looked at her.

"The more people recognize you the harder it is to disappear," she told him. "If your Aunt and Uncle report you missing, and she hears about it, she might remember you well enough to call it in."

"Oh, sorry."

She shook her head, "You have got to stop apologizing for everything that you don't know."

"I'm sor—"

Allie turned and glared at him and Harry looked down at the ground.

"Hey now," she said, "none of that."

Harry looked up hesitantly, "Sorry?" he asked, and relaxed into a grin of his own when she grinned back at him.

"Ready?" she asked.

Harry nodded.

She led him over to an automated kiosk and bought a pair of tickets, then went to a bank of vending machines for a pair of sodas and candy bars.

"Nobody's ever..." he stopped abruptly as Allie led him towards the platform.

"I refuse to talk on an empty stomach, and we're not going to get a chance to eat for a while," she tossed back at him.

"Until I get clean?" he asked.

"Until we both get clean," she said.

"I don't understand," he said.

"I'm not too worried about the—" she waved her hand around "—mundanes, it's the wizards I'm worried about."

Harry looked at her blankly.

"Look, Harry, there is..." she grimaced in frustration. "Magic exists, okay?"

"Magic," Harry repeated tonelessly. Sure the girl had gotten him a soda, and she seemed nice, and best of all, she'd gotten him away from the Dursleys; but that didn't mean she wasn't crazy, did it? Even if she had said that she wasn't all mad. Maybe it could come and go.

"Did anything strange ever happen to you?" she asked. "Something that you couldn't explain?"

"Besides glass disappearing from a snake exhibit?" Harry asked without thinking.

"Does there need to be something else?" She asked as she led him onto a train. "Sounds pretty strange, doesn't it?"

"I don't know how I did it," Harry said softly.

Allie nodded.

"Strange...and I can't explain it," he repeated. "Once, Dudley and his gang were chasing me and I ended up on top of the school kitchens, though I didn't remember going up any stairs or ladders.

And there was this time when Aunt Petunia wasn't happy with my haircut so she took some sheers and nearly made me bald; when I woke up the next day all my hair was back...do those count too?"

She nodded.

"And making a horrible jumper shrink so that I couldn't be made to wear it?"

Another nod.

"And that was...caused by magic?" he ventured.

She nodded again, only this time it was accompanied by a broad smile. "Exactly."

"But how come everyone says magic isn't real then?" Harry asked.

"Because most people don't know that it is," Allie said.

"Why not? I mean, how would you hide it?" Harry demanded.

"Because magic hides itself," Allie said.

"I don't understand," Harry said. "Why would magic hide itself?"

"It doesn't, really," Allie said. "It's the people who use magic who hide it. A couple of hundred years ago a lot of people got scared of magic users and tried to kill them. So the magic users got together and decided to hide. Nowadays magic-folk keep to themselves. Since the mundanes don't interact with magic, it stopped being 'real' to them."

"So only some people know about magic?" Harry asked.

She ran a hand through her long black hair. "Most magic users tend to keep to themselves. They have their own government, their own schools, their own shops...and they have rules about using magic—namely don't—in front of people who don't know. They don't interact much with those who don't use magic."

"And you're a magic user?" Harry asked.

"So are you," Allie pointed. "I've no doubt that you will prove to be a very fine wizard once you've had some training."

"Wow," Harry said. "Am I going to have to get an apprenticeship like you, or am I gonna be able to go to magic school?"

Allie paused and an expression that Harry couldn't identify, but didn't look happy, passed across her face. It was gone in an eyeblink, but when she spoke it was in a painfully neutral voice. "I don't see why you couldn't go to Hogwarts, that's the name of the most prominent school in the UK."

"That'll be so neat. I can't wait to show Dad—" he stopped abruptly. "If people who can do magic don't mingle with those who can't..."

"It's not that they don't, it's just that most don't want to," Allie said. "And there are people born into non-magical families who have the gift, it isn't confined only to magical families."

"But if I can do magic, why can't the Dursleys?" Harry asked. "In fact, why do they say magic doesn't even exist?"

Allie shrugged, "I don't know why they told you that magic doesn't exist, Harry. It could be they don't even know that it exists and that they're just narrow-minded...but I don't think so, at least about the first part."

"Maybe I'm one of those people born into normal families and they don't know?"

Allie didn't say anything for a while. "So, there is the non-magical world, and then there is the magical world. There are also a fair number of people who don't really belong to either. Most of them aren't exactly welcome in the magical world; the parents of magical people born into non-magic families, for example.

"The Ministry of Magic likes to think it keeps all signs of magic undercover—but there are a fair number of people who know that magic exists, even if they don't know about the magical world. Also, most people from the magic world have a hard time blending in. Their taste in clothing tends towards...exotic, miss-matched clothes and colors that clash terribly. And then there are vampires,

werewolves, and various other so-called 'dark creatures' that aren't welcomed by the magical world."

"So I'm some type of magician?"

"No, you're a wizard," she stressed. "Male magic users are wizards, females are witches—at least on the inside of the magic world."

"Was that how you knew me?" Harry asked. "Because of magic?"

"Sorta," she glanced around the car to see if anyone was paying attention to them, and then leaned in close. "I thought that you were either some magic user who thought he was playing a bit of a prank, it'd be about normal for most wizards' sense of humor. When you acted like you didn't know what I was talking about I thought you were one of those magic users from a non-magic family."

"You mean I'm not?"

Allie shook her head and her expression grew serious. "In the magic world you're famous."

"Famous?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, like household-name-famous; everyone knows of you," she said, "At least those inside of Britain do. And that scar of yours is almost as famous. Nobody in the magic world has seen or heard of you in years, that's what has me worried. There's probably some warlock with some sort of monitoring spells on the Dursleys. Some way of tracking you using magic, and—"

"Wait, someone knew?" Harry demanded harshly. "Knew what they did to me?"

"I don't know, maybe," she said.

"And they didn't do anything?" Harry asked.

She put a hand on his arm, "Did they ever beat you?"

Harry took a deep breath, then shook his head. "No, not as such. I mean, Uncle Vernon would punish me, but mostly it was sticking me

in the closet under the stairs without supper. Making me do chores, housework and stuff. For the most part they ignored me otherwise."

"Abuse is still abuse," she muttered darkly, then looked away abruptly. "C'mon."

Harry followed her as she dragged him from the car at the stop. "Where are we going?"

"Just trust me, will you?" she asked, stopping in front of a bank of lockers as she fished a key out of her pocket. She opened one locker and pulled out a large, bulging book-bag.

"What's in there?"

"Supplies," she said, leading him towards the exit. "You said your relatives would most likely ignore you, would they notice you missing when they left the zoo?"

"Probably not unless Uncle Vernon is looking for me to yell at like I said," Harry replied. "Otherwise they probably won't notice that I'm not around until they want me to cook dinner for them. Or breakfast, if they decide to eat out."

She looked at him as they waited on the escalator to leave the tube station.

He shrugged slightly, "I, uh, do a lot of the cooking and all of the cleanup."

She nodded.

Harry shook his head, it was all very confusing. First there was the issue of magic. And then he was supposedly famous, thought he could never remember any indication that he was at all well-known. And then there was the issue of someone supposedly watching him grow up without every doing anything to stop the Dursleys.

It was like some dream, or perhaps nightmare...except that the exhibit glass really had disappeared. And he had talked to the snake. And then there were those other incidents. Certainly it was nice to think that magic really existed, that he really could escape from the Dursleys. But...

"C'mon," Allie said, jerking his arm.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Hotel," she gestured across a street.

It wasn't anything he had ever though a hotel would be like. There was a sign proclaiming it was, of course, but it was a low, grimy, ugly building. There were cars, and none too clean at that, parked haphazardly in the lot in front of it; and to one side a dumpster with its lid ajar over the trash inside was parked just in front of a rather scary-looking alley.

"Meet me on the first floor, okay?" she asked as they crossed the street. "I'll get our key."

"We're going there?" he asked skeptically.

"Just to get rid of any tracking magic," she said.

"And how do we do that?" Harry asked.

"I thought you'd never ask," she said with a smile.

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"You want me to do what?" Harry asked blankly, certain he hadn't heard her correctly

Allie had dumped the contents of the bag, mostly clothes, onto one bed and snatched a large canister of salt from the resultant pile. She had already poured down a heavy line in front of the windows, and was now pouring more in a half-circle that had the door as its base.

"Strip," she repeated. "Stick your clothes in the toilet and pour about a quarter of that," she gestured towards a second canister of salt, "in after it. Then draw a bath and pour the rest of the salt in."

"Okay," Harry said, crossing his arms. "Perhaps I should have asked why?"

She finished the ring and stood up. "Salt is good at neutralizing magic. Not all magic, not even most, really. But it will stop most monitoring and tracking spells. Since those charms are easily placed on clothes, we have to salt the clothes. Since they can also be placed on a person, or the residue of such spells can rub off of clothing or residing at a place with them long enough, we also have to clean your skin, hence the salt water bath. Salting the entrances will serve to disrupt any tracking spells, hopefully long enough for us to get clean and leave."

She pushed past him into the bathroom. "Good, no window."

Harry heard the bath start, and then her head popped out, "You still haven't started?"

"I, uh," Harry felt his face heat.

"Oh for—" she cut herself off and stepped out of the bathroom. "Go ahead, just hurry. Some spells can be transferred by contact. I touched you, so I have to clean myself as well. Don't bother rinsing the salt off, you can do that at my place."

"What about clothes?" he asked.

"Wrap a towel around yourself and come out when you're done," she shot back. "I packed enough stuff so that I could mix and match. There should be enough that we won't look too terrible, but not if we have to wash tracking spells off of them because one of us touched them."

She paused, "On second thought, stuff your clothes in this," she shoved the bag at him.

Harry gave her a searching look.

"I'll explain later," she said reassuringly as she held up a small, grayish bar of what looked like grainy soap.

Harry took it, and was surprised to find that it was a heavy stone.

"Lodestone," Allie said. "Magnitite, if you want the common name; very disruptive of magical fields. I want you to scrub down with it."

"Isn't that what the salt is for?" Harry asked. "Disrupting, er, magical fields?"

Allie smiled, "Yep, but lodestone disrupts magic in a different way than salt. Go on."

Harry nodded and ducked into the bathroom. He set the lock, then double checked it to make sure that it was locked, and sprinkled some salt in front of the door in a half-circle. He wasn't certain it would actually do anything, but, he decided, it couldn't hurt. The bath was filling nicely, and he dumped most of his canister, along with what remained of the first canister, into the water before stripping out of his clothes.

He stuffed the shoes in the bag first, followed by Dudley's too-big trousers and sweater, and Vernon's old socks. Harry hesitated before adding his skivvies. This was definitely turning into an odd day and his stomach reminded him he hadn't eaten for a while.

He unlocked the door and opened it just enough to squeeze the bag out without disturbing the salt, then hurriedly slammed it closed and relocked it

"Remember to get everything soaked and rubbed down with the stone," Allie called through the door. "I'm going to step out for a minute to get these taken care of."

Harry heard the outer door open and then close, leaving him alone in the hotel room. "A salt water bath to get rid of tracking charms, I'm famous, and the girl is clearly insane," he shook his head, unsure if he should be running away or breaking out in hysterics. He glanced at the line of salt in front of the bathroom door. "Probably not saying great things about my sanity," he muttered, and shook his head.

"Why can't my life be normal?" he asked. "Is it too much to ask for? A mother, a father, maybe a brother or sister..." He paused, "And a dog, definitely a dog—a big black one with a long tail that can't stay still."

He looked down at the full bathtub, "Salt water bath...what am I then? Pasta?" Probably not, he decided. But anything beat having to spend a night at the Dursleys. No doubt the bobby's would find him

eventually and he'd have to go back, but it might be fun for a few days.

He slid carefully into the bath, relishing the first bath that he could remember with actually hot water, and not the tepid, lukewarm water he was left with after everyone else had had their baths or showers. Even the annoying salty smell issuing from the bath didn't make it less enjoyable...

"Harry?" someone thumped on the door. "You still alive in there?"

"Wha—?" Harry started up in the bath, eyes flashing as he hurriedly scanned the room. It wasn't the bathroom at Number 4.

"Harry!"

"Just a minute!" he called, ducking under the water and scrubbing at his hair. "Just, uh, getting the salt worked in," he sputtered.

"Just hurry up," Allie called through the door.

Harry grabbed the stone, and for once living with the Dursleys proved useful. Years of having to take quick, thorough baths, had made scrubbing down and getting out very nearly instinctive. The lodestone was like no soap he had ever used; lightly abrasive, but without any suds, and oddly comfortable.

Harry jumped out of the bath and grabbed one of the thick, white, courtesy towels (wonderfully dry and warm), wishing he could take more time to enjoy being the first person to use a bath-towel for once, as he wiped salt water from his body. "Uh, done," he said, folding the towel around himself and reaching for the door knob.

"Good," Allie said, as he opened the door. He moved into the room, but Allie calling his name made him turn back. She gestured towards the the line of salt on the floor, not crossing it, and looked inquiringly at Harry.

He felt his face heat, "I thought, uh..." he looked down.

"It was a good idea," she said. "Not sure if it did anything to help, but it certainly didn't hurt. Nice accurate line too, it allows the door to open without disturbing it. First time?"

Harry nodded.

"Very good job then," she decided. "Go grab some clothes and get changed."

Harry nodded again.

There was no underwear in the pile on the bed. Or at least none for guys, and he certainly wasn't going to wear what there was. He grabbed a black and red t-shirt advertising some kind of band and pulled it over his head. The smaller of the two pairs of jeans, he was pleasantly surprised to discover, actually fit quite well compared to what he usually had to work with. He had to roll up the legs, and if it was a little loose in the waist it certainly didn't compare to how Dudley's currently nine inches-too-big-in-the-waist jeans fit him. The socks he had to choose from were on the large side, and he had to tighten the laces in the shoes almost as much as it was possible, but on the whole he couldn't remember a time when he wore clothes that fit better.

Allie exited the bathroom with one towel wrapped around herself and another around her hair. She eyed him critically, "We're going to have to get you some things that fit you better."

Better? Harry's eyes went wide, "But these...I mean, these are very nice," he said politely.

She snorted, "No they aren't. They are," she stressed, "a drastic improvement upon what you were wearing. Where did they shop? Thrift stores?"

"Dudley's cast-offs," Harry said.

"The fat one?" she asked.

Harry nodded.

"Well shit," she shook her head and reached for the remaining clothes. "Turn around, will you?"

Once more Harry felt his face heat as he did as she asked.

"Done"

Already? From what he knew from Aunt Petunia it should have taken—

"Harry!"

"What?" he asked quickly, turning back to face the room. Allie was once more dressed in black, but this time she was holding a small bag out to him.

"What is this?" Harry asked, taking it as she pulled on gloves of a similar material.

"Silk stops a lot of magic," Allie said, taking a plastic bag and disappearing into the bathroom as her lecture continued. "Not the...call it 'active magic' for want of a better term, but the more subtle things. It'll stop emitted magical auras and fields, and will allow a person wearing it to slip past a lot of the low-level wards. It'll also block magical transmissions, communication spells..."

"Tracking spells," Harry said.

"Those that broadcast an 'I am here' signal," Allie said. "Even if that signal can only be picked up by an enchanted compact-mirror a hundred miles away," she reappeared with the bag held carefully in one gloved hand. "Wanted to make sure I got everything."

"What about the salt?" Harry asked.

"We'll leave that for house keeping," she said, tossing the key on one bed before leading Harry out the door.

A/N: The music Trelawney heard was 'The Sun is Burning' by Paul Simon, and is not owned by me.

Chapter 2: Do you Believe in Magic?

"Whatever you think you can do or believe you can do, begin it.

Action has magic, grace and power in it."

Johan Wolfgang von Goethe

Albus Dumbledore paced the parapets of the East Wall like an ancient sentry watching for some enemy to come over the horizon. Despite this he was not actually watching the horizon. In fact, he was not watching much of anything at all. The East Wall was one of his favorite haunts when he had to think and his office grew oppressive for two reasons. First, there was hardly ever anyone there because it was remote, and second it was hard for the spacious vistas to be anything close to oppressive.

Young Harry Potter had met a new magic user, and not seconds later, alarms had screamed that one of Albus Dumbledore's professors had been seriously wounded. Fawkes had taken him to Sybill's work room to find the Divination Professor standing before her table, Tarot cards swirling around her as though caught in a vortex though there was not the slightest breeze. Her fingers had been so firmly affixed to the crystal ball on the center of the table that her skin had actually burned to it. What had been most disturbing, however, was the blood and thicker things streaming down her face from her eye sockets as she stood motionless without making the slightest sound.

A moment later the crystal ball had disappeared in an explosion that rivaled anything he had ever heard come out of Severus Snape's classroom. Albus had gotten a shield up in time to protect himself, but Sybill had taken almost the full force of the blast. Poppy had arrived moments later, and while Sybill would live without scars to her face, her eyes were impossible to fix. It might be possible for her to be fitted with a pair of magical eyes, but not until it was discovered how her real eyes had been ruined.

If, that is, she would even accept them.

Privately Albus had his doubts. Portraying herself as the blind Divination Professor who gave up purely mortal sight to see glimpses of the future was just the kind of thing Sybill would enjoy playing to.

But his worry about what had happened had been eclipsed by worry about what Sybill had said before Madam Pomfrey had dosed her with a dreamless sleep potion so that she could work. The medi-witch had been inclined to dismiss Sybill's ravings as the product of shock, and they might very well be so. But the idea of an older Harry Potter loosing demons into downtown London filled him with a sick sort of dread. And necromancy, while not the 'darkest of the Dark Arts' as some sensationalist authors and politicians would have people believe, was no better. Worse, it seemed as though he hadn't used either because he'd become a Dark Lord himself, but because he'd resorted to it in order to fight Tom.

Then there was the nameless woman. He couldn't think of a witch that bore her resemblance in Britain, but she could have easily come from another nation. France, possibly, given that she had first appeared in Sybill's vision of Paris? Yes, that was it. She was probably French.

That other nations would join their fight was only mildly hopeful for it meant that Tom had most likely attacked them first. His former student had many faults, but stupidity had never been among them. If he had felt comfortable attacking outside of Britain, it meant he felt that he could win even if the nations gathered together against him.

And not only that, if Sybill's ravings had been a true vision and not a product of insanity or pain, it meant that he not only felt comfortable facing all the wizarding world, but the muggle world as well.

In his youth Albus had dreamed of uniting the two, for both worlds had many things to offer one another, but now? Their weapons were too great. The fear in the world, scarcely unknown in his childhood, was now so great that their responses bordered on psychotic. How would they respond to magic now? With fear, with hatred, or even worse, would they see it as the answer to all of their problems like far too many witches and wizards did these days?

He had headed for the East Wall upon leaving the medical wing, but no sooner had he stepped outside than a portrait had informed him that Hagrid needed to speak with him immediately. Such words and tone were foreign to the half-giant's normal demeanor, and the Headmaster had hurried outside to Hagrid's hut to find him standing with a centaur who had told him, in depressingly unobscured language, that the stars had been twisted out of alignment.

What was that supposed to mean? He didn't question Firenze, the ability of centaurs to be able to hold the positions of all the heavenly bodies inside their minds and point them out with amazing accuracy at slightest need or want, was well known. In fact it was only very recently that the muggles were able to devise machines that approached the same capability and sensitivity as a centaur. But something that could twist all of the stars and planets out of their ordained tracks?

Something buzzed in his robes and Albus absently pulled his pocket-watch out of his robes and peered at the twelve hands. It took him a moment to realize that it wasn't the alarm that reminded him of tea, but something else buzzing. He pulled out a second pocket-watch and touched a tiny stud. A small sphere, barely larger than a snitch, popped out of the face of the watch. Fully a score of hands swept through circles inside the sphere and Albus Dumbledore felt his heart skip a beat for all of the hands should have been still, or, at most, only two or three should have been moving.

Harry Potter was missing.

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Harry Potter was not missing for he knew exactly where he was.

He was sitting in a tattered armchair.

The fabric was worn smooth where it wasn't ripped, and all four legs had been removed some time in the past so that the bottom of the chair rested on the hardwood floor of Allie's flat.

Most of the décor was utterly—almost boringly—normal. The furniture was mostly old and heavily worn. None of it matched, and none of it would have passed his Aunt's muster, but he didn't doubt that, like the legless armchair he now sat in, the rest were all sinfully comfortable...if somewhat strange to sit in.

He moved in the chair, trying to get just right. The short distance to the floor was...odd to say the least, and he finally settled for curling his legs up next to him and leaning heavily on an arm in a way that

Petunia would never have allowed. For the first time in ages he was contentedly full. Not 'unhungry', not 'fine', full.

Okay, so the stew that Allie had had going could have used a good deal of work, but it was wonderful nonetheless and she wouldn't be having the leftovers she'd planned for. The strawberries and thick whipping cream had made for delightful afters, and one of them would need to go shopping if they were to have milk for breakfast.

Neither the odd furniture, nor the feeling of a full stomach, distracted him from the very...odd nature of the... Harry supposed he could call it 'art', but it wasn't like anything he had ever seen. Chalk drawings—a few numbers and many things that might have been letters, but mostly just squiggles—covered the walls, the ceiling, and portions of the floor. Many were set into patterns around circles or triangles, or many-sided many-pointed figures he had no names for. There were stars with five points, stars with six points, stars with 12 points or more. There were stars within stars, and stars within circles, and squares within stars, and combinations thereof. Some of the figures were in white chalk, others in red, blue, green, orange, purple, and a particularly vivid shade of pink.

Right before the large windows (which had their own designs) was an absolutely enormous circle. Matching it was an identical circle (as best Harry could tell) on the ceiling above it. Weird characters lined the outer and inner edges of the ring-like circle, and a second set of characters, utterly different from the first, was set inside the ring itself. A large drawing, similar to some on the walls, depicting a triangle with a line through it, and more of the odd writings, sat inside it.

"Like it, huh?" Allie asked.

"It's wonderful," Harry said softly.

His aunt, he knew, would have disagreed. The whole room was barely the size of the living room in Number 4. A mattress filled one corner opposite the corner which held a small range-oven, an even smaller refrigerator, a sink, and a trio of cabinets. The circle took up most of the third corner (opposite the door) and a second door on the wall shared by the kitchen and circle, led to a small bathroom that was barely larger than his cupboard under the stars but managed to fit in a toilet, a sink, and a shower. The outer wall,

opposite the door to the hall, was brick, and wedged between the mattress and circle was a grate on a pair of cinderblocks, under which was a small camp stove. The odor of mildew and cigarette smoke (though he didn't see any sign that Allie was a smoker) was pervasive, and the ceiling bore the grim testament of water damage. Despite all of these failings, it was clean, and kept in a precise neatness that his Aunt probably would have found satisfactory.

He turned to look at her, "What is it?"

"Magic circle," she smirked.

Harry scowled. "Okay, so what does it do?"

"See these sigils?" she asked, gesturing towards the walls.

Harry nodded, it wasn't like it was possible to miss them.

"These are designed to keep magic out, to nullify magic inside these walls," she said. "Most magic-users prefer wards, which are sort of like magical fences and burglar alarms and things of that nature. But like them, wards can be broken if you know the right magic. There are more complicated, dangerous, wards that I could use, but since there is a whole building full of mundanes I prefer not to risk one of them setting something of that nature off."

"Could they do that?" Harry asked. "I mean, if they don't have magic..."

"You know those people who dig up old Egyptian tombs?" she asked.

"You mean the Pharaoh's Curse is real?" Harry asked.

"There are curse-breakers who are supposed to neutralize the curses the old wizards of Egypt put on the tombs before mundanes open them," she said. "There was one, back in the late eighteen hundreds, I think, that they missed. The mundanes got there first. I think it killed something like seventy people before the curse-breakers were able to stop it."

"Wow," Harry said.

"Since I didn't, couldn't, use wards I used a method that drove magic out. A sort of reverse-ward. Inside that circle is the one place in this flat where magic can be freely and easily practiced."

"Why would you want to keep magic out?" Harry asked.

"I like my privacy," Allie stated. "And then there are—" she stopped abruptly. "Let's just say I sleep better at night when I'm not wondering if something is suddenly going to pop up in my flat."

"Oh...does that happen often?"

"You'd be surprised," she said drolly. "Or it could just be me." She shrugged, "Either way, it is possible, given a powerful enough caster, for magic to be performed outside of the circle, but it will be far from easy. There might be a half dozen, maybe as many as ten, magic users capable of it in the UK."

"Wow," Harry said again. "Are there a lot of...wizards and witches in England?"

"More than in some countries, less than in others. We do have one of the most powerful wizards on the planet though."

"Really?" Harry asked eagerly.

She nodded shortly, staring at the circle.

"Allie?" Harry asked when she didn't reply.

Allie turned to him and nodded towards the circle. "You want to try some?"

"Me?" Harry asked. "You want me to try magic?"

"Why not?" she asked. "Go on and sit in the circle."

Harry got up and walked over to the circle and stood in it. "Now what?"

"First," she said. "You see that triangle with the line through it?"

Harry nodded, the indicated...design, he guessed, took up most of the inside of the circle.

"That's a lock. As long as it's there, the circle doesn't work. So erase the sigil—that's the proper name for it. There are a pile of rags in that footlocker next to the circle."

There were more than just rags in the footlocker, Harry saw as soon as he pushed it open. There were a collection of different colored candles in a variety of holders, some crystals, a pack of multi-hued chalk, and several knives...among other things he couldn't begin to name. He grabbed one of the rags and hurried back into the circle and began wiping away the chalked sigil.

"That's good," Allie said before he had done little more than smear the sigil across the circle.

Harry frowned, "I thought it had to be clean," he half-asked.

"Not clean, just broken," she frowned. "I don't think I can explain the technical details of it without explaining a bunch of other stuff first. Just suffice to say that it's the design that is important. If you break the design, you break the effects. Really, just breaking one of the lines, even if it was only by running your finger across one of them to disturb the chalk, would have been enough. Smearing the entire thing was more than sufficient."

"Okay," Harry agreed after a moment. "What now?"

She gave a half-smile that was not, quite, a smirk; and walked to the footlocker where she pulled out a plain white candle without a stand. "Have a seat," she gestured to the floor as she walked into the circle and sat down.

Harry sat down across from her.

Allie held the candle loosely with both hands. "Now watch."

Harry frowned, what, exactly, was he supposed to watch? When nothing happened right away he felt a stab of disappointment. Seeing all the pictures—sigils, he mentally berated himself—and the glowing coin, he had thought for a moment that magic was real. But

as nothing happened he began to wonder if the coin hadn't just been a trick of the light.

"Harry?"

"Huh?" he asked, startled out of his reverie.

The candle was burning gently in Allie's hands. "Huh?" he asked again, staring first at it and then at Allie.

"Magic," she said.

"Can you do that again?" he asked.

She blew the candle out and held it again, "Watch this time," she said.

Harry concentrated on the candle, and this time noticed a brief wisp of smoke just before the candle burst aflame. He reached out to touch it, and pulled back with a singed finger. "Magic," he whispered.

Allie blew out the candle again and handed it to him. "There is a triad, three points—well, technically I guess there are five—that all successful magic is based on."

"You mean like magic words?" Harry asked. "Like hocuspocus or abracadabra and magic wands and top hats and stuff?"

She shook her head. "Incantations, wand movements, steps in rituals, or ingredients in potions, serve to harness effects. They make magic easier to both perform and duplicate. How much good does it do to develop a spell if you are the only person able to cast it?"

"Not much, I suppose," Harry said. "I mean, if you die, then nobody can use it."

"Exactly," Allie said. "Spell-crafting, designing new spells, incorporates things like wand movements and incantations to make a spell that other magic users can easily duplicate." She wagged a finger at him, "That is a gross simplification. I certainly don't understand all of what they do. But the point remains."

Harry nodded, being able to make a spell that others could do made sense enough. "So what is successful magic based on?" he asked.

"The first point is power," she ticked off a finger. "Take your pick on where it comes from—the pure-bloods like to say it comes from within a wizard or witch; that it's a part of them. Others say that power is external but witches and wizards are conduits for it."

"What do you think?" Harry asked.

Allie shrugged, "Don't know. There are Talents, specific magical gifts that some people get and others don't. At least some of them seem to follow blood-lines, but not all of them do. I suppose they could be totally internal, or simply a way of using power that others can't. It's sufficient, I guess, just to know that the power exists and that not all wizards and witches are equal. Some are more powerful, some are less, and some are better in certain types of spells and weaker in others."

"If you say so," Harry said.

"Okay, point two," another finger. "Imagination. Some people have it, some people don't. There are mundanes with tons more imagination than most wizards and witches. Imagination sets the limit for what you can do. If you can't imagine doing more than lighting this candle, you're never going to be able to do more than light the candle."

Harry nodded again, "What are the last three points?"

"Well, the two I wasn't really counting are skill and control," Allie said.

"So, spells and the like?" Harry asked. "Incantations and wand movements?"

Allie nodded, "That would be skill. The better you are able to duplicate those, the less power it takes."

"But you didn't use a wand," Harry said.

"Nope," Allie said. "Don't have one, never used one. That keeps me from doing almost all magic that mainstream witches and wizards use. But I'm powerful enough that I can sell what skills I do have in that fringe world I mentioned."

"Those that can't do magic, but know it exists?"

"Exactly. Now, I'm not saying there's no skill involved, just that my skills are sufficiently different to give wizards and witches as tough a time doing what I do as I'd have doing what they do." She paused for Harry to nod his head in understanding. "Control is the compliment of skill, and it deals with just what it sounds like."

Allie gestured towards the candle Harry held, "Starting a fire is a skill. Control would cover how big a fire you started and how much power it takes you to do it. If you channel power in a globe around the wick there's a lot of power that isn't doing anything and is wasted, whereas if you channel it to just the wick you don't waste as much."

"How do I know if I'm wasting power?" Harry asked.

"Experience mainly," Allie said. "Magic is just like any other ability, the more you do the better you get. The better you get and the more experience you have, the more you can manipulate it."

"Okay, so power is how much magic you can do," Harry said. "Imagination governs what magic you can do. So what's the last point?"

"Will. Strength of character. Want. Desire. Whatever you decide to call it, it all comes down to the same thing. A strong will requires less power to achieve the same result. A powerful wizard with a weak will, will waste power on spells that a middling witch or wizard can perform. There are spells, enchantments, that can make you feel or do things. A strong strength of character can fight them off."

"Now," she said, gesturing at the candle. "Take that candle and light it. You have power aplenty. You know it can be done because you just watched me. All you have to do is focus, and want it enough."

"How do you want something bad enough to make it happen?" Harry asked, taking the candle. "I can think of loads of times I wanted something to happen, but nothing did."

"How about the glass of that snake enclosure?"

Harry bit his lip, "That was pretty neat," he said. "Um...there was this time I was being chased by Dudley and ended up on top of the school's kitchen. And another time Aunt Petunia nearly shaved me bald after a haircut and when I woke up the next morning all of my hair was back."

"Did you ever feel something special just before something did happen?" she asked.

Harry frowned. "No," he said after a moment, "Or at least not that I can remember."

Allie reached out and cupped his hands, still holding the candle, in hers. "Don't look at me, look at the candle. I want you to feel the wax under your hands, feel the line where wax dripped down one side. Start adding visual details..."

Harry felt himself starting to drift as Allie's voice droned. He was startled out of his reverie by Allie's hands releasing his. He blinked. Twice. It was...apparently not impossible. "I don't believe it," he whispered. "I'm looking at it, but..."

"Remember what I said about imagination?" she asked. "If you can't imagine yourself doing it, if you think you can't, then you can't. At the same time, if you think, even have a little niggling doubt that says you can..." She leaned forward and blew it out. "Now do it again, and this time," she stood up and stepped outside of the circle. "You're on your own."

Harry frowned, "Are you—"

"Not me," she cut him off. "You. If you don't believe, you are going to fail. Same as last time; focus on the candle, see the wick, picture what it looks burning, then will it to burn."

"Okay," Harry said, not at all sure if he believed himself when he said it, but... Somehow the candle had already burned twice without any way of being normally lit that he had seen so that meant it had to be possible...right? He scowled and focused on that, the possibility that magic existed. He stared at the wick, then imagined it burning.

The candle remained unlit.

He scowled at it. Okay, that didn't work, so maybe if he imagined it being lit, a transition of some kind? The wick was cold to the touch, and he imagined it growing warmer, warmer until it was hot. A wisp of smoke curled upward from the black tip of the candle wick, then began to glow ember-red. But it wasn't until a flame appeared and then grew that he noticed...

And promptly dropped the candle on the floor where it went abruptly out.

"See?" Allie gave him another smile that stopped just short of being a smirk. "You can do it."

"I can do magic," he whispered.

He picked up the candle and stared at it for a moment. Then he turned and looked up at Allie. "Can you teach me something else?"

She snorted, "You're exhausted, Harry. Lot of excitement this afternoon, a good meal, and you spent almost twenty minutes lighting the candle."

Harry looked at the clock, "It didn't seem like it."

She shook her head, "You really have no clue, do you?" she asked.

"No," Harry rolled his eyes. "Why?"

"Most people can't do that, not right away. Figuring out how to consciously use magic without the use of a focus is something most wizards and witches have trouble with. Nature of the type of magic they wield, I think." She frowned in thought, but then shrugged. "I know other types of magic users don't have trouble with it. Could be a cultural thing, I suppose. My point is, that was a very good start."

"Oh," Harry said, picking up the candle. "You said I was famous?"

"Yeah," Allie sighed.

"So you know why I am?" Harry asked before yawning.

Allie nodded hesitantly.

When she didn't say anything Harry frowned. "Will you tell me?"

"You sure you want to know? It isn't really a nice story."

"Yes," Harry said.

For a moment he thought Allie was going to refuse, then her shoulders slumped slightly. "Fine. C'mon," she held out her hand for the candle, and when he handed it to her she gestured towards the legless chair.

Harry curled in the chair and watched as she put the candle away, then re-chalked the triangle design in the center of the circle. She dusted her hands when she finished and walked to the kitchen nook where she poured herself a glass of water and asked if Harry wanted one, which he politely declined. She returned and settled down on the couch.

"It begins with a Dark Lord," she said. "I like to think that magic isn't really good or evil, that it just exists and the way that people use it determines if it's good or evil. A lot, almost all, wizards and witches would disagree with me though so maybe I'm just projecting my hopes..." she stared down at her glass of water. "Most of them divide magic into 'light' and 'dark' good and bad. I don't know, I can think of a lot of ways that perfectly good magic can be used to hurt people. To be fair, a lot of what people call dark magic really is bad stuff; magic with far fewer good uses than bad ones...and some that have no good uses at all."

"Like...hurting people?"

Allie looked up at him, "Worse, much worse," she said softly. "The worst of it, what I know of it, has no good qualities."

She was silent for a moment, then visibly shivered. "So. This Dark Lord, he was about as bad as they come. He killed a lot of people, made a lot of other people disappear. He started quietly at first, spent time learning darker and darker magic, using rituals to make himself more powerful. By the beginning of the seventies he had all of the British Isles, or at least the wizarding community, locked in terror. Nulls, the mundane world, they were both suffering too, but

the wizarding world—as I said—takes certain measures to keep magic a secret from the mundanes, who wizards call 'muggles'."

She toyed with her glass again, "He never really got outside of the Isles. Most Dark Lords tend to be fairly localized, or at least regionalized, which is probably a good thing. For a time it was thought that he was effectively unbeatable. Utter nonsense of course, but people were scared, and scared people do...weird things. Your parents opposed him, were pretty vocal about it too."

"Then they disappeared into hiding." She snorted, "They probably already were hiding. Opposing a Dark Lord is one thing. Telling him where you live, your infant son lives, and inviting him to take his best shot is something else. Anyway, they went into better hiding. Only their location was betrayed. He showed up, killed them both, and then tried to kill you."

"What do you mean 'tried'?" Harry asked.

"I mean he tried to cast a death curse, a curse that kills, on you. And that curse..." she waved a hand airily, "bounced. The story goes that he died right there and you were marked with a curse scar in the shape of a lightning bolt on your forehead."

"You don't believe it?" Harry asked.

"I have trouble with some parts. Why you lived, for one. It should have killed you and didn't. There are theories out there that range from you being the second coming of Christ, to intervention by aliens, to being the reincarnation of Elvis. Probably the most serious one is that your parents' deaths formed some sort of protection," she closed her eyes. "Lots of people died, Harry, a lot of them in front of their families and friends who were killed in turn just as easily. Also, they say he died, but no body was ever found."

"Could it have been destroyed by the curse?" Harry asked.

Allie shrugged, "I suppose. There are curses that will do that. But the story actually names a specific curse, and that curse is not capable of that—which brings up the question that, if you were the only survivor, how do they know which curse was cast?"

She shook her head, "It doesn't matter. He was simply gone, Harry, but nobody can say where or why."

"So I...defeated him?" Harry asked.

She shrugged again, "Apparently. Anyway, people went kind of crazy after that. Dark Lord was gone and they decided it was party time. You became a hero over night so expect everyone to know you. Most of them are going to want to look at the scar."

"I don't want to be famous," Harry protested. "Especially not for something I can't remember!"

"Yeah, well, we don't always get what we want," she muttered.

Harry flinched at her suddenly bitter tone, but she shook her head and said, "Sorry, Harry, you don't deserve that."

Harry nodded, "What was his name?"

Allie looked at him, "Sorry?"

"His name, the Dark Lord," Harry said. "What was it?"

"Most wizards and witches don't mention it. For too many of them it brings back memories that they'd just as soon forget." She snorted, "Gone for ten years and most are still scared witless by a name."

She shook her head, "Voldemort, he called himself Lord Voldemort, poorly pronounced French and all."

"Oh," Harry said. "So, another magic lesson?"

Allie laughed. "You feel up for it?"

Harry nodded eagerly.

"Okay then," Allie said. "Why don't you go grab that silk bag, and we'll check ourselves for tracking charms."

"Why didn't we do that earlier?" Harry asked.

"Mostly because any that we have on us after what we did are beyond anything I can do to remove," Allie replied as she retrieved blue and white chalk.

Harry watched as she drew several runes around the circle, explaining each one as she drew it, and then emptied the silk bag in the center of the circle. A wallet and some loose coins spilled out, followed by a charm bracelet, and two knives in sheaths. One had a wooden handle, but the other (which was at least as long as his outstretched hand) was black with a silver cap at the end and silver runes laid into it.

Allie swept up the collection and placed them on top of a piece of silk. "Now, I can't scan for magic traces directly, so I have to use an indirect approach and scan for all magic in effect."

"You mean spells and stuff that are already on them?" Harry asked curiously.

"That's exactly what I mean," Allie said with an approving nod. "Now watch."

Harry watched as she lit a trio of candles around the circle, and then chanted for a moment in a language he didn't know. The circle glowed briefly, as did the things in it. When the circle stopped glowing, so did the wallet and change, and, after a moment, the plain-looking knife stopped glowing as well. In contrast, the black-handled knife looked like someone had dunked it into a rainbow and spun it until the colors wrapped around each other and then bound in place with a black and gold spider-web. For a moment he thought the charm bracelet was like the knife until he realized that where the knife was glowing with different colors, each individual charm was glowing a separate color.

"What do the colors mean?" Harry asked. "How would we know if there is a tracking charm on one?"

"A tracking charm would show a magical link," Allie said. "Basically, we'd see a line of magic that went from it to the edge of the circle. If something had an illusion on it the illusion would ripple, allowing us to see what it was disguising. If there was something transfigured, we'd see an image of what it was made from."

"Made from?" Harry asked curiously.

Allie nodded, "There are spells that will allow a magic user to change a guinea pig into a teapot. If we had one of those, we'd see an image of the guinea pig."

"Why would anyone want to turn a guinea pig into a teapot?" Harry asked

"Probably some witch wanted to see if it could be done," Allie said. "Other than that I have no idea."

"And there isn't magic that could block us from seeing it?"

Allie looked at him.

"I mean, if magic can do anything we can imagine..."

Allie shook her head, "Imagination, or rather a lack of one, sets a hard limit, Harry. It isn't the only one. As for blocking this, sure, I can think of a half-dozen ways. What it is, however, is sufficiently different from how most use magic that I don't think it'll be a problem.

"It's like the difference between a plane and a train, Harry. Both will take you somewhere, but they do it in very different ways."

"If you say so," Harry said doubtfully. "So why do those things glow?"

"Well, the knife is a magic-working tool," Allie said. "It's had enough power channeled through it, or used to direct or shape enough power, that it's become a magic item in its own right. Each of the charms was forged with an enchantment."

She cancelled the spell and lifted up the bracelet, "Hold out your hand."

"It tingles," Harry observed as she dropped it into his cupped hands. "Is it powerful?"

Allie shrugged, "It depends on who you ask. A lot of witches and wizards would look at it and scoff. They'd have a point too. There is a lot of magic that can be done with a wand that just isn't capable of

being done without one. Most of it is a lot more impressive than what can be done without one. On the other hand, for what it can do..."

Harry held onto the bracelet a moment longer before handing it back. "What about us?"

Allie shook her head, "Harry, if there is still a tracking spell on us it'll take me longer than we're going to be here to undo it. In all likelihood, a spell that is still in effect after what we did is either powerful enough, or subtle enough, that I'm not going to be able to remove it anyway. Especially not after that salt-water dunking we did."

"Because salt disrupts magic," Harry said.

"Especially my kind of magic," Allie said with a nod. "Try using it against someone with a wand and mostly they'll just laugh at you."

A thought occurred to Harry. "We lit the candles, how were we able to do that if the salt disrupts magic?"

"Because the candles were simply us," Allie said. "Salt is less effective against magic when it is focused that way. Actually, it isn't much use at all against a lot of it."

"Oh," Harry said. He thought about it for a moment, "So most witches and wizards use wands, and the way they use them is the way we used the candles?"

"Very similar," Allie said. "We were channeling magic through the candles with the end-goal of lighting them. Wands are only one example of a magical focus, though the most common. A focus is a tool that magic is channeled through that concentrates and directs it more efficiently."

"Very generally speaking, there are only two types of magic, and everything else is a sub-type of one or the other, or both. The first is focus-based, which tends towards more immediate and spectacular. The second is non-focus based. It takes longer to set up, a single spell can take minutes, hours, or even days compared to seconds for most focus-based."

"Is it more powerful?"

"No, just different," Allie said. "But it is also a lot rarer in the magical community—at least it is in this country. Most people you see using it regularly will be like me, living on the fringe between both magical and mundane communities."

"Oh," Harry said. He thought for a moment, "So because I supposedly killed this Voldemort, I have to be part of the magical community? Does that mean I can't stay with you?"

Allie shook her head. "You can't stay with me anyway, Harry. Not for long. I mean, I can barely afford to take care of myself. I have—"

"I can help," Harry protested. "I mean, I can cook, and clean, and stuff. That's what the Dursleys made me do anyway."

"It isn't that," Allie hesitated. "I didn't phrase myself well. I'm a..." she grimaced. "I have a magical gift that is—" she stopped abruptly and gave him a long look. "I can do something with magic that very few people can. It's sort of like talking to snakes, not many people can do it."

"But I can, I mean, I talked to that boa," Harry said. "I liked him, he was nice."

"I believe you."

"Did you listen to us?" Harry asked.

"You were speaking parsletongue, snake-speech," Allie said. "Unless you can speak it, it sounds like, well, you were talking to a snake. It's all hissing and stuff."

"So everyone heard me hissing at that snake?" Harry asked.

"Those that were paying attention," Allie said. "I'd advise you to be careful with it when you're with wizards and witches, though. It's a really rare gift, and it is also one that is seen by most people in the magical community as dark."

"Dark?" Harry asked. "I thought you said there was no such thing."

"I said that I don't really believe there is such a thing," Allie said. "Most people in the magical community say there is, and they'll turn on you in an instant if you appear as anything less than the hero they picture you as."

"But I didn't do anything!" Harry protested.

"I know," she said. "Believe me, Harry, I know. Just...for your sake if nothing else, don't tell anyone unless you really trust them."

"Okay," Harry said softly. "What's your gift?"

Allie smiled bitterly. "Parslemouths have an undeserved reputation for their Talent being a sign of a dark wizard, though there have been a number of very prominent wizards that have that Talent and only a few of them evil. The gift I have, well, let me put it this way. Its reputation is a lot darker than being able to talk to snakes is, and its reputation is less than half of what it deserves."

"It's dangerous?" Harry asked.

"Extremely."

"Oh," Harry said softly, not at all sure what he should say to that.

There was a knocking on the door before he could say more. A moment later the locks clicked back and the door was pushed open by a tall man wearing a black leather duster and holding a gnarled wood staff in his right hand. Grey shaggy hair fell to his shoulders, and his face was partially concealed behind great, shaggy whiskers.

"Master G," Allie said, standing.

"Ms. Hawthorne," he said with a German accent.

"Harry, this is Gilbert Sullivan," Allie said. "He's my teacher."

"Harry Potter, sir," Harry said as the man stomped into the room.

"Yes, I see," the man said. "New to the world of magic, are you?"

"Yes, sir," Harry agreed as the man crossed the room to him.

"Well? Stand up, boy. In the circle," he gestured.

Harry scrambled into the circle as Sullivan stalked to it without pause.

Sullivan thudded his staff against the floor and the runes around the circle burst into multi-hued light. Up close Harry could see that Sullivan's eyes were the peculiar grey color of storm clouds before their fury is unleashed, and the deep-set wrinkles around them conveyed an age his powerful form belied. A heavily callused finger pushed back his fringe and traced his scar.

"Hmph," the man grunted and abruptly turned away from him. "You can sit," he said dismissively.

"Well?" Allie asked.

"That curse scar acts as a personal rune, one with power behind it," he said. "It isn't a Mark of Power, but with a piece of magic like that—if you survive it, of course—you cannot not be linked at some level. There's also that Trace that your Ministry likes to put on magical children, though it's still dormant. It won't be activated until he has his wand. Aside from that he's clean—though with a blood sample someone wouldn't need to place a charm directly on him."

"There's no practical way of stopping something like that," Allie said.

"Hmph," he said again. "Did you even consider using a Binding?"

"You're joking, right?"

"What's a binding?" Harry asked.

"What does it sound like, Boy?" Sullivan asked, giving Harry a look that said quite clearly that the older man thought Harry was an idiot.

"It blocks off part of your being," Allie said. "I ran into a...poltergeist, I guess, at a house I was working at. Normal poltergeists are like avatars of chaos, but this one worked with fear. If you used the railing to keep from falling down the stairs it could pick you up and throw you down them. We all ended up wearing Bindings against fear, and I can't tell you the number of times we almost killed ourselves because we had no concept of what was dangerous."

"And if blood was used to track me, a Binding would block off my blood?"

"Blood is an agent," Sullivan said gruffly. "The actual spell would have to be tied to something that is part of you, an emotion, magic, your health."

"Probably not the last two," Allie said giving Sullivan an intent look. "Slapping any kind of magic spell directly onto magic is incredibly difficult, and something as ill-defined as 'health' isn't much easier. Forget it, I'm not putting Bindings on him."

"Your place, not mine," Sullivan said with a shrug. "The wards you have will hold well enough. Even the Ministry's Trace doesn't function in here. But if someone was running a tracking spell using blood, or running an active scrying, they'll have seen him come in."

"Excuse me, but who are you, exactly?" Harry asked.

"You don't know who I am?" the man asked furiously. "I am one of the greatest wizards Prussia has ever produced. I did the Thaumeturgical analysis of dragon's blood and charted the interactions of seventh-sphere enchantments. I was the first to describe the use of multi-origin runeforms in conjunction with non-alphabetic iconographs. There was a time when even muggles trembled in fear of what I would do next!"

Allie rolled her eyes and mimed a mouth opening and closing with one hand.

"Muggles?" Harry asked, struggling not to laugh at Allie's irreverence for the imposing mage. "Are you..."

"Yes," Sullivan growled. "That Gilbert and that Sullivan. A Prussian librettist and composer poking fun at the ridiculous concepts of law, the navy, and social position, would have hardly been appreciated in London. But pick out a pair of muggles with the right background..." he smiled. "I will admit that Gilbert had a fertile imagination and managed to get his actors to actually act, and Sullivan was hardly less of a task master when it came to getting them to perform their parts accurately and on pitch."

Allie snickered and Sullivan whirled around to glare at her. "You laugh, missy. But you forget—I know all of your secrets."

"And I yours," Allie said, her voice suddenly cold.

The man made another 'hmpf' and turned away from her.

Harry hesitated, the man was gruff and rude and had called him 'boy' which was Uncle Vernon's favorite thing to call him (when he had to call Harry anything). But despite all of that, Allie clearly thought pretty highly of him and was learning from him, so...

"Sir," he said in a carefully respectful voice, "can you teach me magic?"

The man waved a hand behind him, towards Harry. "Enough with the 'sir' you'll make me feel older than my already very many decades." He turned back, "If you must, call me Sullivan. If you call me 'Master G' like Hawthorne does, I'll turn you into a fluffy white rabbit and feed you to a fox."

"Charming, isn't he?" Allie asked dryly.

"Okay, Master, er, Sullivan," Harry said, trying again. "Can you teach me magic?"

Gilbert gave him a long hard look. "Promise me the next eight years of your life, and I'll make you more famous than any wizard since Merlin. Albus Dumbledore himself will be in awe of you, and that self-proclaimed 'Dark Lord' you had running around a couple years back will prostrate himself at your feet. If you think you're famous now, just you wait. You won't have to hold any political position, but governments will do as you suggest. You won't need any general's stars, but any army you face will lay down their arms before you. You will never want for anything in your life. Money, women, glory, the very powers of the universe, all this I truly can deliver, and more still, if you accept."

"But I don't want any of those things," Harry protested.

The man smiled through his whiskers and his voice was soft as he said, "then truly you have more wisdom, Harry Potter, than most

fellows thrice your age." He ran his left hand through his curly mane. "You don't need me to teach you magic, Dumbledore has a place open for you at his little school."

"His school?"

"Hogwarts," Sullivan said. "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry if you want the whole thing. There are dozens of magic schools out there, but Hogwarts is better than most. But even the best school is no good at all if you aren't motivated to learn. You'll do well there, I think." He turned to Allie, "You understand I want no part in any trouble that comes of this?"

Allie nodded sharply. "I do know other people than just you, Master G, and I know you like your privacy. If I have to I might be waking some up, but that's not a problem. This won't come back to bother you."

"See that it doesn't," the man said as he stomped his way to the door. He unlocked it and slammed it shut behind him.

"That was...interesting," Harry said as Allie pushed herself out of the chair and locked the door. "Is he always so...gruff?"

"Pretty much," Allie said. "A tad paranoid too, but an absolute genius."

"So he's the one that taught you," he waved towards the circle.

"More or less," Allie said. "You heard what he offered. He offered me something similar. It was a serious offer, both of them. I told him I just wanted to learn to control my...abilities. So he's taught me runes, wards, some ritual magic..." She yanked open a battered chest of drawers with a squeal of jammed wood and rummaged around for a moment before coming out with a t-shirt and a pair of biking shorts.

"Go take a shower and rinse the salt off," she told him, effectively ending the conversation by dropping the clothes in his lap. "There should be clean towels hanging up. That'll do you for sleep wear until we can get you some more appropriate clothes."

Chapter 3: Brave New World

John: "O brave new world that has such people in it. Let's start at once."

Brave New World, Aldous Huxley

John is quoting W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act V, Sc. I, lines 183-184

A peel of thunder that seemed to last forever startled Harry into wakefulness. He rolled off of the mattress trying to put it between him and the noise. The circle inscribed on the floor was lit up, the runes glowing with all the colors of the rainbow. The center of the circle was filled with blue-white light as captured lightning arced between it and the circle on the ceiling that mirrored it.

"C'mon, Harry, we have to go!" Allie shouted in his ear.

Harry turned to her. Allie's face glowed from the energy discharges in stark contrast to the shadows. "What is it?"

"Someone tried to apparate in, magical teleportation," Allie explained, pulling him towards the grate over the camp-stove.

"I thought the...wards?" Harry asked, then continued without waiting for an answer from her, "Wards stopped magic inside the apartment."

"They do!" Allie shouted over the noise as she worked furiously on the stove to get it lit. "Even with the lock the circle is a weak point, makes it the natural point to apparate into. Of course right now it's acting like a trap because I closed it last night, but it won't hold for long. Not against someone powerful enough to force their way into using it as an apparing point. We'll have to go to that friend of mine a little sooner than I intended."

"How?" Harry shouted back as she pulled away from the now burning camp-stove.

"Magic!"

She reached up and broke a line in a drawing on the wall behind the 'fireplace', then grabbed a handful of powder from a jar next to it and threw it into the air above the grate. The small blue flames of the

burning fuel grew until they danced several feet above the metal grating, and turned a venomous green. Seemingly unconcerned, Allie stuck her head into the fire.

It didn't seem to harm her, despite the fact that her head was in flames so thick and furious that Harry couldn't see her above her neck. In fact, if he didn't know any better, it almost looked like she was talking to someone, though he couldn't hear her any more than he could see her head. But when she pulled her head out a moment later she seemed in perfect health.

"Grab a handful and throw it in," she told him.

Feeling rather foolish, Harry stooped to grab up a fistful of the grainy powder and tossed it into the fire which had reduced once more to its normal blue flame. Once more they burst into green light.

"Get up there!" she shouted.

"You want me to do what?"

"Get on the grate," she replied, grabbing him around the waist.

Harry tried to pull away, but she pulled him in after her and shouted something that he couldn't make out. He saw her scribe a line through a sigil on the wall, then they were spinning. He saw...rooms, places he didn't recognize. Most were dark and empty, but some had small floating lights, or candles, torches, or old metal lanterns, one or two had actual people...

And then suddenly they stopped spinning as one room in particular swam before them and they pitched out onto the floor in a tangle of arms and legs.

"Allie?" a man with dark skin and a blue turban asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," she said, disentangling from Harry and brushing soot off herself. "I bloody well hate the floo."

"What was that?" Harry asked, pushing himself up.

"Floo," Allie said. "Go in one fireplace, come out another. Also has a handy function that works like a telephone."

The man peered at Harry, "Is this..."

"Harry Potter, meet Chirag Patil. Chirag, Harry Potter," Allie said.

"Er, how do you do, Mr. Patil?" Harry asked awkwardly.

"Quite well," he said. "I take it you are unfamiliar with floo travel?"

"No," Harry said. "I'm not familiar with it."

"He didn't know a thing about magic," Allie said. "I bumped into him at the zoo earlier today. Wild magic burst, vanished a pane of glass in a snake exhibit. I didn't even know who he was at first."

"You know nothing at all?" he asked.

"I know how to read, and math, and stuff," Harry said. "I'm not stupid."

"I didn't mean to imply that you were," the man said, raising a solitary eyebrow at Harry's reply. "I only meant to ask if you were totally unaware of the existence of magic."

"Oh, sorry," Harry said. "Allie told me some things. That magic is real and about Voldemort, sir."

"'Chirag' will do, or 'Mr. Patil' if you insist on being formal," he said, wincing only slightly when Harry invoked the dread lord's name. "Anything else?"

"Just that, Mr. Patil," Harry repeated.

"I see," he murmured. He looked at Allie, "Let me guess, you put him in the circle?"

"He lit the candle, first try on his own, in twenty minutes," Allie said. "And that before he'd rinsed the salt off."

"Salt?" For a moment Mr. Patil looked confused, then he chuckled and shook his head. "Still living like someone is out to get you, Allie?"

"It doesn't mean they aren't," she said. "You know very well what I stand to inherit, and why my father is rotting in Azkaban for good reason. Either would be reason enough for people to want to get their hands on me. And given what I am...well, it makes sense for me to avoid people and especially those people who'd be looking for me."

Mr. Patil didn't reply for a moment, "I think, Allie, that you would find it much easier to do the latter if you would trust yourself, and your training, a little more."

"Easy for you to say," she said tonelessly.

"Perhaps," Mr. Patil said, turning back to Harry with a smile. "Still, someone managed to light their candle on the first try—"

"Second, sir—sorry, Mr. Patil," Harry said, quickly correcting his mistake as the adult frowned. "I, uh, couldn't get it to light simply by imagining it burning. I had to imagine the wick getting hot and then—"

Mr. Patil laughed, "To get it lit in twenty minutes on your first try is no small feat, Harry, especially when you do it in the magical equivalent of someone else's private workshop. I'm amazed that Allie hadn't by now poured so much of her power into the place that you were able to get more than a wisp of smoke."

Harry looked at Allie.

"Belief, remember?" she asked. "Doubt it a real magic-killer."

"Oh," he said in response and watched as Mr. Patil turned to question Allie.

"What happened?" he asked her.

"Someone tried to apparate, or maybe portkey, into my apartment," she said, "probably apparate. The circle trapped them. We got out as quickly as we could. I had us both take salt-water baths and rub down with a lodestone before we went to my flat, and I checked the few things I didn't abandon for a magical trace. I don't know who found me or how they did it, or if they were tracking Harry some way."

"And yourselves?"

"You're the one that taught me that magically imaging living things is harder," Allie said. "Besides, if there was a tracking charm on one of us that wasn't disrupted it'd almost certainly be beyond my skill to dispel."

"You think someone has been keeping an eye on Harry," Mr. Patil said quietly.

"Me?" Harry blurted. "But I'm—"

"Harry Potter," Allie finished. "I told you. In the magical community—the wizarding world, as it likes to call itself—you're a household name. Everyone has heard of you, though most of what they've heard is a complete fabrication. Also, just because the Dark Lord disappeared that day doesn't mean that his followers did. I wouldn't have put it past the Ministry to have a monitoring charm on you just in case one of them decided to kill you in revenge."

"What about your relatives?" Mr. Patil asked.

"His relatives are nulls," Allie said before Harry could reply. "They didn't seem to notice him missing. I checked the news before I turned in, nothing about Harry being reported as missing. As I said, we both took salt water baths at a different location, we scrubbed down with a lodestone, and I sent his clothes off in a passing car. If there are tracking spells on him they're beyond me to block, and you know what my place is like."

"What about Mr. Sullivan?" Harry asked. From the way Allie suddenly tensed he wondered if he had said something he shouldn't have.

"Mr. Sullivan?" Mr. Patil asked.

"A friend," Allie said. "Fully qualified wizard, he's the one who taught me how to control an innate magical talent. He didn't find any active tracking spells, but pointed out that with a sample of Harry's blood a long-term passive tracking spell could have been set up."

Mr. Patil nodded, "Such a tracking spell would report his last location before entering your apartment. Your front door, I presume. There are not many powerful enough to emplace a spell capably of standing up to those types of wards and then be able to report through the magical dead-zone within your flat. Most of those who could do it prefer a life of private research rather than employment in the Ministry of Magic." He frowned and stroked his beard with one hand, "there was no warning, correct?"

Harry watched as Allie nodded tiredly.

"The first notice we had was the circle-trap activating," the young witch said. She looked at a picture on a wall. Harry saw that besides the man, there was a lovely woman, and two girls about his age. All were moving.

"My floo inserted us somewhere inside two dozen random activations so we have a little security. If you don't want us staying because of the twins, I unders—"

"Think nothing of it, Allie," he said. "I, we, all owe you too much." He paused and looked at Harry. "And you have me forgetting my other guest. You remember where the guest rooms are, yes? Go, sleep. We can discuss what to do in the light of day."

"Darkness is better for plotting," she said.

"Not when you are exhausted," he said sternly. "Go. Sleep."

"Ah, excuse me," Harry said, and felt his face heat as both turned to look at him. "Is...is that picture...moving?" he asked, gesturing towards the picture.

"Yes," Allie said.

"Oh," Harry said, feeling somewhat relieved that he wasn't imagining it. "How?"

Both the man and Allie traded looks, and then Allie smirked, "Magic."

Harry nodded slowly, "Okay...but what if whoever was after me decides to come here?"

Mr. Patil smiled at him, "Allie's wards are designed with her...unique abilities in mind. They create an area in which no magic is capable, thus limiting the chances of her harming another should she lose control of her Talent at an inopportune moment. As a side effect, they are highly effective in both hiding her location and making it difficult to enter by means of magic. The wards over this house are substantially different. One of the wards makes it impossible to apparate into the house or grounds for any who are not keyed into them. I assure you, you are quite safe."

"Oh," Harry said.

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Harry woke up to find a face he didn't know filling his vision. Not only that, it was in perfect focus as its owner was less than four inches from his face.

"Bout time you woke up," the face said crossly.

"Uh...sorry?" Harry asked.

"Not as much as you will be," the face promised, then looked up at someone else and nodded.

Harry sat up and reached for his glasses. His fingers had just coiled around the cool metal and glass when there came a squeal from out in the hall, and he got his glasses on his face just in time to get a perfectly focused vision of a red streak in mid-air. Then the bed bounced violently as it hit. He felt the bed try to throw him off, but the sheets trapped him and slapped him back down onto the mattress, which was when the human-shaped former-streak began to bounce. Harry struggled against the sheets as the owner of the face that had woken him began to bounce in a blue counterpart to the red.

"FOOD!" Came an echoing call from downstairs.

Both streaks stopped long enough for Harry to get a glimpse of the two girls he had seen wave at him from the portrait the night before. He was reminded of lions he had seen the day before, sitting patiently, heads tracking towards the direction the call had come from.

"Foood," both said in a hypnotic drone, giving the word several added syllables. Then they were twin streaks once more and Harry was alone.

"Met the twins, huh?" Allie's head peeked into his room.

"Is that what happened?" Harry asked.

"Better get up and get downstairs before they eat everything. I'll warn you in advance, the twins have zero table manners in the morning." She paused and her face grew thoughtful, "at least they didn't the last time I was around for breakfast."

"What do I wear?" Harry asked.

"There should be some robes in the closet," Allie gestured. "Just pull on something that fits reasonably."

Harry struggled out of the tangled sheets and closed the door. He set about making the bed first, then opened the closet. There were a couple of heavy coats and half a dozen cloaks. The rest were...robes he supposed, in various sizes and colors. He settled for pulling some fairly simple black robes over his head. They were a bit long and he had to hold them up to keep from tripping on them, but they seemed to do just fine.

He walked into the dinning room. Unlike Allie's apartment there were no magical writings scrawled across every surface. Instead it seemed...normal. Normal-normal, not the magazine-picture version of 'normal' that his Aunt insisted on, with only a very few (and extremely odd) things to suggest the family that lived in the house was anything but. The pictures were, by far, the least of these.

The twins were going through a stack of pancakes with a voracious haste that reminded Harry briefly of the tank of feeding piranhas from the day before. He managed to take a better look at Mr. Patil now that he wasn't half-asleep. He was a tall man with dark skin and an absolutely magnificent beard.

Across from him sat a woman in blue robes. She had a darkly tanned face, though lighter than her husband's swarthy look, with

long black hair and a red dot on her forehead. Her lips twitched in what might have been a smile when she noticed him.

"Ah, Mister Potter," Mr. Patil said. "So good of you to join us, the girls have not yet managed to consume all of breakfast, as such there are still pancakes left for you."

Both girls stopped eating and stared at Harry.

"Hello," the one in blue said as her sister turned and glared at Allie.

"You could have warned us," she said accusingly.

"Sorry," Allie said, not sounding sorry at all.

"My girls, Padma, and her sister Parvati," Mr. Patil said warmly, indicating the blue and red former-blurs in turn. "They start at Hogwarts this year; and this is my wife, Anjuli."

"Ma'am," Harry said, at a loss for what he was supposed to do. Breakfast for him was usually a piece of dry toast or two, after the Dursleys were done.

"Why are you wearing witches' robes?" Padma asked.

Harry felt his face heat and he glanced back towards the door.

"Harry just learned that magic is real yesterday," Mr. Patil said gently.

"But he's Harry Potter!" Parvati protested. "He has to know about magic!"

"I, uh, was raised, um, mundane?" he asked Allie.

"Muggle," she supplied. "At least that's the term popular in the wizarding world."

"So why do you use 'mundane' or 'null' then?" Harry asked.

"There's a fairly substantial fringe group of people that know that magic exists but aren't part of the wizarding world. For a couple of reasons that's where most of my business is and the term isn't exactly well taken amongst the 'muggles' so I tend to use

'mundanes' to refer to people who don't know magic exists, and 'nulls' for those who do, but have no magical abilities or aptitude." She nodded towards the platters that were rapidly being denuded. "You better eat before the twins eat it all."

Harry nodded and quietly took the empty seat. The platter the pancakes were on slid over to his plate and a trio of pancakes flipped off it and onto his. "Wow," he whispered.

"He really doesn't know about magic," Parvati said with a similar tone of awe.

Padma rolled her eyes at her sister and turned to Harry. "Just tell them what you want."

"Them?" Harry asked.

Padma nodded and looked at a tiny pitcher, "more syrup, please." The tiny silver pitcher hopped over to her plate and deftly drizzled syrup over her pancake. "Thank you," she told it before turning back to Harry. "That one is maple. There're also apricot, blueberry, raspberry, and pumpkin syrup," she gestured towards four more pitchers in turn. "That one over there is whipped cream. You can tell which ones have fruit."

Harry pondered his choices, not only pancakes but toppings too—and served with magic at that. He hesitantly asked for blueberries and whipped cream, and the pancakes disappeared under an onslaught as Parvati giggled until Padma reminded him he had to thank them when he had enough.

"If you want some more pancakes dear, to go with your cream and berries, all you have to do is ask," Mrs. Patil said with another quirk of her lips.

Mr. Patil laughed as the twins burst out in giggles, and Allie cracked a small smile.

"Thank you," Harry said. "So, uh, what's Hogwarts?" he asked as he began to eat.

The twins looked at each other. "She didn't even tell him about Hogwarts," Parvati whispered in shock.

"I didn't have time," Allie protested.

The twins glared at her, then turned to him. "Magic school!" they proclaimed.

"You haven't gotten your acceptance letter yet?" Mr. Patil asked.

"No, sir," Harry said, then quickly added, "Mr. Patil," at the disapproving frown his response had received.

"Better," he nodded. "I can't imagine why not. Usually the letters are very prompt. You should have received one around now. They usually arrive well before the recipients eleventh birthday. Acceptance owls have to be in by August 1st, so commonly students with birthdays in August and July receive theirs about two or three months before then to give them time to decide."

"Owls?" Harry asked.

"They use owls to send post," Allie said, sounding like she didn't consider it an improvement over normal post. She turned to Mr. Patil, "You don't think someone might have tried for a more...personal invitation?"

"At almost ten at night?" Mr. Patil asked skeptically. "Even Albus has to sleep sometimes, Allie. I know you dislike the man, but in this case don't you think you're letting your feelings cloud your judgment?"

"No," she muttered darkly.

"Albus?" Harry asked.

"Albus Dumbledore," Mr. Patil said. "The Headmaster of Hogwarts."

"Slightly mad, über-powerful, beloved of everybody, and ruler of the free world," Allie added.

"Don't talk about Dumbledore like that!" Parvati snapped. "He's a great wizard!"

Allie started to retort, then shook her head. She turned back to Harry, "Dumbledore is a very powerful wizard, probably one of the top five in the world. Besides being Hogwarts' Headmaster he is also the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and a half-dozen other things."

"Supreme Mugwump?" Harry asked. "And what's a 'Wizengamot'?"

"Supreme Mugwump is sort of like a chairman," Mr. Patil told him. "He's in overall charge. The International Confederation of Wizards is similar to the Muggle's United Nations, only much older."

Harry nodded slowly. He wasn't certain what the United Nations was, but Uncle Vernon had talked about it often enough to know it was either bad, incompetent, or useless, or perhaps all three—although, considering it was Uncle Vernon, the complete opposite could very well be the case.

"The Wizengamot serves as a legislative body, they are the ones who create the laws of the wizarding world," Mr. Patil continued. "And a number of the wizards and witches in the Wizengamot also serve as the judges that make up the judicial branch. They decide what the laws mean, sit in judgment upon those who are accused of crimes, and the like. This body is also called the Wizengamot. The Chief Warlock is both the Chairman of legislative Wizengamot, and the Chief Justice of the judicial Wizengamot."

"Oh," Harry said, trying to work his way through that. "So he's very important?"

"That's one way of putting it," Allie said.

"He's the greatest wizard ever," Parvati proclaimed.

Padma frowned at her sister, "At least since Merlin."

There was a hissing sound and the fire in the fireplace turned green. A gray, woolly thing appeared, and for a moment Harry thought a goat had somehow managed to wedge itself in the fireplace. Then an arm reached out and a hand uncoiled the longest beard Harry had ever seen. It was even longer and bushier than Mr. Sullivan's was. It was connected to a face with bushy gray eyebrows, madly twinkling blue eyes behind half-moon eyeglasses, and managed to

managed to look both twelve and a hundred and twenty years old at the same time.

"Ah, Chirag, I'm glad I caught you at breakfast."

"Speak of the devil and he hears your call," Allie muttered.

"Might I come over?"

Mr. Patil cocked his head to one side, "Business?"

"Of a sort, this is about one of your house-guests," the wizard said.

Mr. Patil's face darkened slightly, but he nodded.

The man's face withdrew from the fireplace, followed by the long beard.

"An," Mr. Patil glanced at his wife.

Harry watched as Mrs. Patil turned and looked at her husband, and had the uncomfortable sensation that there was an entire conversation held in the span of several seconds and an exchanged look.

"I will take the girls," she said simply, rising from the table.

"Do we hafta?" Parvati demanded.

"Yes, you'll have plenty of time to see Albus Dumbledore when you go to Hogwarts," her mother stated, already ushering Padma out of the room.

"Allie," Mr. Patil said as the young teen stood.

She turned and looked at him.

"This is my house, you are my guest."

Harry was pretty sure there was something in that sentence he missed because Allie almost instantly relaxed and nodded. A half-remembered line from a book he had managed to look at in his

primary school's library came to mind, "Curiouser and curiouser," he whispered.

"Indeed," Mr. Patil said.

Harry flushed as he realized that he had been over-heard just as the fire once more turned green.

This time a man in purple robes with pink polka-dots and a silver belt stepped out of the fire. It was the same man as before; the beard was now tucked under the belt, as though the accessory was more for holding it in place than holding his robes up. In addition he wore a very elaborate, very pointed, very orange hat.

"Chirag, how wonderful to see you again," the wizard proclaimed. He looked at Allie with a much less friendly look that still seemed to be more than casually polite. As though they were close acquaintances rather than friends. "Miss—"

"Hawthorn," Allie cut him off, her voice colder than a highland blizzard. "Alice Hawthorn."

Harry stared at her, but Dumbledore nodded and said "of course."

"And Harry Potter," the wizard continued, "so very good to see you, my dear boy," he didn't laugh, but his tone conveyed one nonetheless.

"And you are, Sir?" Harry asked, jerking his gaze away from Allie.

"Albus Perceval Wulfric Brian Dumbledore," Allie said, leaving the slightest of pauses between each name. "Supreme Mugwump, International Confederation of Wizards; Chief Warlock, Wizengamot; Grand Sorcerer; Order of Merlin, First Class; Discover of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, ad nauseam."

"Don't forget champion at ten-pin bowling," Dumbledore smiled, then turned to Harry. "I usually just go by Albus Dumbledore," he wizard confided. "The rest just goes on for far too long."

"Oh," Harry said.

"I have something for you," Dumbledore said. "Meant to give it to you before now but I've had a bit of trouble finding you."

Allie snorted.

Dumbledore frowned slightly, his eyes drifting towards her, then he looked back at Harry. A thick parchment envelope appeared in his hand and he handed it to Harry.

It was thick, heavy, and had a sort of buttery-smooth creamy texture to it. Written in a spidery hand in luminous green ink was written:

Harry Potter
The Patil's dining room
#7 Hatton Lane
Birmingham
West Midlands

Harry flipped it over to reveal a purple wax seal. Impressed into the wax were a lion, a snake, some kind of weasel, and a bird all around a large capital 'H'. He glanced at Dumbledore who was now whistling merrily, and then Allie who didn't look nearly so cheerful, before turning back to the envelope and slit open the seal.

Inside was a brief letter, written in gem-toned purple ink that glowed slightly. Unlike the scrawl on the envelope, the letter was written in a broad, fluid, and very curvy hand. He flipped to the next page and found a supply list: magic books, robes, a cauldron, and a wand. He stopped abruptly and shook his head. There was no way the Dursleys were going to pay for this.

"Problem?" Dumbledore asked.

"My Aunt and Uncle," Harry said. "They aren't going to pay for this and I, well, I don't have any—"

"Money?" Dumbledore asked. "Not an issue, I assure you. Your name has been on our rolls since you were born. Your parents were also fairly well off. I understand they left more than sufficient funds to see you through school."

Harry frowned, "My Uncle said they were penniless, died in a car accident."

Dumbledore seemed taken aback. "Did they ever mention magic to you?"

Harry shook his head, "Allie...Alice explained to me last night."

"Indeed," he said, turning to look at the girl in question. "What else did you... explain?"

Allie rolled her eyes, "Magic exists, some general background...why he is famous."

Dumbledore's expression darkened for a moment, then his eyes were twinkling in full force again. "Very well."

"What's Hogwarts like, Allie?" Harry asked.

"I don't go to Hogwarts," Allie said in a toneless voice that made Harry look at his friend in concern.

That stopped him. He had a friend. Okay, so they never said the word, but...Allie had rescued—the word wasn't quite right, but Harry decided it would serve for now—him from the Dursleys. She'd introduced him to magic. Taught him how to do his first magic. "Why?" he asked after a moment.

She shrugged, "I don't know." She turned to Dumbledore, "How about it, Headmaster? Why was my request to be admitted as a student denied? Was it because of what I am...or is it because of who I am?"

"As a daughter of a Death Eater," Albus began.

"Please, Lucius Malfoy's brat starts this year," Allie said, crossing her arms. "I can name a dozen offspring of Death Eaters in your school already. That doesn't include—"

"Lucius Malfoy was bewitched and ensorcelled into acting against his better judgment," Dumbledore said sternly. "Your father—"

"Didn't have Malfoy's over-priced lawyers at his trial and he wasn't in a position to fill the judges' coffers with gold," Alice said bluntly.

"Death Eaters?" Harry asked into the oppressive silence that had suddenly filled the room. "I've heard Allie use the term before, and I was wondering..."

"Voldemort's inner circle of lackeys and henchmen," Allie said, not taking her eyes off of Dumbledore.

"Miss Thorne, is it really necessary for—"

"Hawthorne," she grated. "I'm not entitled to the Thorne name yet. As for whether or not it's necessary, I think it is. Better that he goes into your world, his world, knowing as much of what he should have learned a long time ago as he possibly can learn in the time left," she continued, but Dumbledore had turned from her and was once more watching Harry.

Dumbledore ignored her and turned to Harry. "Shall I put you down as having decided to attend?" he asked kindly.

"I haven't made a decision yet," Harry said.

"Is it really so difficult a choice?" he asked, raising one large, bushy eyebrow. "Certainly it's what your parents would have wanted."

Harry thought of a half dozen ways he could have responded to that...most of them would have gotten him stuck in the cupboard under the stairs if the Dursleys had heard it. Or maybe they wouldn't have, they seemed to be the type that would disapprove of magic, maybe even more than they disapproved of him. He bit back the retort and decided to attempt to derail what looked to be the beginnings of an argument. One thing he knew very well was to avoid arguing with an adult. "Mr. Patil, Allie, er, Alice, what do you think I should do?"

Mr. Patil considered him. "You must do what you feel is right, of course," he said after a moment.

"There are other good schools out there," Allie added. "None that are quite as good in this country, perhaps, but they're out there: Beauxbatons in France and Durmstrang in Latvia, if you insist on staying in Europe. Outside of that your options are more open. The Adelaide Arcane Academy of Australia has a high rating, the Salem

Wizard's and the Salem Witch's Institutes both are well regarded, then there is the—"

"Yes, yes, all fine schools, certainly," Dumbledore said smoothly. "But they aren't Hogwarts."

"No, which is why I'm not studying at any of them after you turned me away," Allie said dryly. "The only school my trust will provide funds for is Hogwarts, and since I'm tapping out the allowance that I can draw for help learn how to deal with my...gift." The last was delivered so bitterly that Harry was pretty sure she meant curse.

Dumbledore ignored her. "Harry, please, your parents would—"

"My parents," Harry said softly, "are dead, Headmaster. I never knew them. Aside from their names I know next to nothing about them, and it seems that most of what I do know about them is lies, told me by the Dursleys. Unless you know some piece of magic that will bring them back, I doubt I will ever know them."

Dumbledore looked at Allie, to which she shrugged. "I didn't exactly have time to explain that magic does have some limits."

Harry frowned slightly, but pressed on, "Appealing to me by telling me what they would have wanted isn't scoring any points."

Dumbledore nodded slowly, as though Harry had made a good point, but he didn't say anything. Instead he seemed to find one of the framed photographs on the wall to be of particular interest, and stared at it intently as he thought.

"Why can't Allie go to Hogwarts?" Harry finally asked when the silence had gotten to oppressive.

"Hmm?" Dumbledore asked. "Ah, my apologies, Harry, I allowed my mind to wander and..." he made a small waving gesture. "Aside from her blood relationship to one of the worst of Lord Voldemort's...followers, Ms. Thorne—"

"Hawthorn."

"—also has a natural inclination towards certain magical Talents that are—ill-suited, shall we say?—for a school, and pose a hazard to both herself and those around her," Dumbledore said.

Allie started to say something, but Mr. Patil walked over and set a hand on her shoulder. "Allie, please," he said, "You aren't helping your case."

"I shouldn't have to make a case," Allie said.

"Is it dangerous?" Harry asked.

"Why do you think I live alone in a one-room flat with wards and runes and sigils chalked on all the walls, the ceiling, and floor?" Allie asked. "The allowance from the Thorne trust is not exactly ungenerous, and wizard gold goes a long way in the mundane world, but private magical instruction tends to be very expensive, especially when it is as...specialized as what I've needed."

"I'm sorry," Harry said.

She shrugged, "It's not your fault, Harry. You don't need to keep apologizing for it."

Harry looked at Mr. Patil, "Do I have to go to this school?"

"As Allie said, there are many fine schools," Mr. Patil began.

"No," Harry scowled. "I mean to this kind of school, magic school."

"Do you not wish to learn magic, Harry?" Dumbledore asked. "There are many marvelous things that I am sure that Chirag and Ms. Thorne have not yet had time to tell you of."

Allie gave a small humph, but apparently stopped protesting Dumbledore's use of the name.

"Flying brooms, and potions, and spells that are only limited by your own imagination; buildings that are supported entirely by magic, rare and fascinating creatures, items that have been enchanted to be much more than they appear. Such are only the beginnings of the wonders the magical world holds."

Harry bit his lip and looked back and forth between the two adults. Dumbledore seemed pretty insistent on getting him to go to Hogwarts, at the same time Mr. Patil seemed perfectly willing to let him 'make his own choice'. He had heard similar things from teachers before, but there were very few times it had worked out well in the end between Dudley and the Dursleys and even other teachers.

"I want to learn magic," he decided carefully.

Dumbledore smiled, "Excellent. In that case..."

"But," Harry said, turning away from Dumbledore to avoid seeing how he'd take being interrupted. Probably not well, most adults in his experience didn't...but Allie trusted Mr. Patil, and he had said he didn't have to worry inside his house, so Harry was willing to take the chance. "I don't want to have to leave my first real friend."

Allie's expression turned guarded, "That's really nice of you, but—"

"You could teach me," Harry said.

"No," Allie said at the same time Dumbledore said, "That is not a good idea." Both traded looks that Harry couldn't read, then Allie turned back to him. "What I do, Harry; or at least the magic I know how to do, it mostly isn't something that can be taught. The strongest stuff is all natural Talent, and it isn't the kind of thing you want to learn in the first place.

"I could probably teach you the sigils, glyphs, some ritual magic, things like that, but that would be the extent of it. If you wanted to learn how to use a wand or other focus tool..." she shook her head.

"What about Mr. Sullivan?" Harry asked.

"Master G could teach you that," Allie allowed, "you heard his offer. At the same time, however, he likes his privacy and you are a very public figure. Once the magical world realizes you are around..."

Harry frowned, okay, so getting Sullivan to teach him was out. Part of him was disappointed, but he really didn't want what the wizard had offered. Allie couldn't afford to go to another school, but... "What if I pay—"

"No," Allie said, cutting him off.

"You said that my family was well-off, and you said that your family had money, you can pay me back when you can get at it," Harry pressed.

"No," Allie repeated.

Which only left one real option, to Harry's way of thinking.

"Well then, I guess you'll have to come to Hogwarts too."

Allie blinked, "Excuse me?" she asked.

Dumbledore frowned.

"Please?" Harry asked.

Allie frowned, "Why? I mean, why insist that I come too?"

"I told you," Harry frowned. "You're my first friend."

"I'm sure that is an exaggeration," Dumbledore said.

"No," Harry said flatly. "It's not. My aunt and uncle hate me. My cousin makes sure that nobody wants to be my friend. I'm not allowed to do any better than he is in school."

"Harry," Dumbledore said. "I'm sure that your relatives do not hate you."

"Fine," Harry said. "They don't care then."

"Of course they care," Dumbledore said.

"They why haven't they reported me missing or something?" Harry asked. "I left them at the zoo yesterday. They probably didn't even notice that I had gone."

"I'm sure that they are quite worried," Dumbledore said absently, pulling out a bowl of candies from his voluminous robes. "Lemon drop?"

"No," Harry said flatly. "Thank you."

Dumbledore popped a sweet in his mouth and proffered the bowl around, Mr. Patil and Allie both turned down the offer.

Harry took a deep breath and continued, "Both hate anything 'abnormal'. I'm sure that both are going to be furious when they find out, if they find out, that I'm going to a magic school."

"Nonsense," Dumbledore sucked on his lemon drop. "They will be quite proud. Most muggle parents are when they find out that they have a child with such a gift."

Harry stared at him for a moment. The idea that the Dursleys would be 'proud' of him was utterly bizarre. Clearly the Headmaster didn't know them...either that or his connection to, well, reality, was much less firm than he seemed to believe. "I want Allie to come too."

Dumbledore considered him, blue eyes twinkling merrily. "Aside from certain...magical proclivities, let us say; there remain other issues that make her attendance at Hogwarts...problematical. Even if we overlook the identity of her father, there is still the issue of her age."

"So?" Harry asked.

"Harry," Allie said. "I don't have the grounding in basic, focus-oriented magical knowledge to go into my age-year. I'd have to enter in yours."

"That would be the more obvious, yes," Dumbledore said. He paused briefly before continuing. "There is also the problem of her magical core having had several additional years of development. Magical channels have had those same years of stabilization. The channels that focused-based magic depend upon will have atrophied and decayed from lack of development."

"What?" Harry asked.

"He means that it may not be possible for Allie to perform to curriculum-standard in some areas of magic," Mr. Patil said. "Not having the exposure to some fields of magic, practicing their spells,

may have caused her magic to...seal those areas off as other areas developed instead."

Dumbledore was looking quite serious now. "I don't believe that Ms. Thorne attending Hogwarts is the wisest course of action, Harry."

"You said I was famous, right Allie?" Harry asked, not looking away from Dumbledore as he spoke. "Do you think other schools would have a problem with you attending as well as me?"

Allie scowled, "I don't want you pulling any strings for me, Harry."

"Still," Dumbledore mused. "I'm sure that with some careful thought, some sort of reasonable accommodation can be reached to minimize the danger to students and disruption in classes." He hummed and nodded to himself, "Yes, yes, something can be worked out. Perhaps the use of..." he wandered off into thought, the twinkle in his eyes slowing.

Mr. Patil cleared his throat noisily.

"Hmm?" Dumbledore asked, turning back to him. "Oh, yes, excuse me, lost in thought. I'm quite certain some accommodation can be reached."

"You said that already," Allie noted dryly.

"So I did, so I did," Dumbledore smiled broadly, eyes once more twinkling away. "Very well, Harry. I will see that your...friend receives an acceptance letter directly." He considered Mr. Patil. "Chirag, would it bother you terribly if Harry were to remain here for the remained of the summer? I will let his Aunt and Uncle, and his muggle school, know that he'll not be returning until the end of the Hogwarts school year."

"Certainly, we would be honored to have him," Mr. Patil said.

"Very well, Chirag, Harry, Ms. Thorne," he said, nodding to each in turn before walking back to the fireplace. He tossed in a handful of powder and the flames turned green. Harry watched as he stepped into the flames, said something, and disappeared.

"You should not have done that," Allie said, finally disrupting the silence that had filled the room with Dumbledore's departure.

"I thought you'd be happy," Harry frowned.

"If I wanted charity I would have taken Chirag up on his offer to send me to Adelaide or the Center for Mystical Studies in Switzerland, or even Miskatonic Uni, years ago," Allie said shortly.

"Allie, Harry, please," Mr. Patil said. "Allie, I never understood your reluctance to take my offer for help. The Thorne family is not exactly poor; you would have been more than able to pay me back once you came of age if you had insisted on doing so."

"A favor for a favor owed," Allie said. "Nothing I did was worth a loan as extensive as the one you're talking about."

Harry busied himself with another pancake. There was a respect, a level of equality, between the two that he couldn't understand. Allie was two—certainly not more than three—years older than him, yet Mr. Patil was talking to her as though she were an adult. He wondered for a moment if the magical world considered adulthood to come earlier. After a moment he decided it really wasn't important. The Thorne family, it seemed, was pretty well off, only Allie couldn't touch the money (or at least not most of it) until she 'was of age' which meant she wasn't...yet. Then there was the talk of favors and debts, which seemed to have more significance than the Dursleys gave and none of which seemed to revolve around money. Speaking of which...

"How do I pay?" he asked.

The other two people in the room turned to him, and Mr. Patil frowned. "You are my guest, Harry. There is no need for..."

"I think he meant his school supplies," Allie said dryly.

Harry nodded.

Mr. Patil's frown disappeared. "I would imagine the Potters would have a Gringotts vault, perhaps several. They were an old, very influential, and quite affluent, family."

"Vault?" Harry asked.

"Gringotts is a wizard bank," Allie said, "the wizard bank, actually. It's staffed entirely by goblins. They're nice enough, if you're courteous to them. They aren't human so what they consider to be polite can be a bit...odd. Most wizards and witches look down on them for a variety of rather stupid reasons. Vaults are just what they sound like and each is tied to a key. We can ask one of the managers about that, it shouldn't be a problem."

"Okay," Harry agreed.

"We'll also get some money exchanged, get you some decent mundane wear," Allie said.

"When are you thinking?" Chirag asked.

"I have a job in Westmorland two days from now, might last a week or more," Allie said. "Tomorrow would probably be best, but that means I have to prep today."

"What kind of job?" Harry asked.

Allie hesitated.

"Allie's magical talent, Harry," Chirag stepped in smoothly, "while not particularly well received by the magical community at large, and frankly quite dangerous, can be put to some particularly useful uses."

"Like what?" Harry asked.

"In this case?" Allie asked. "An old castle that's being cleaned up for mundanes has an infestation. Someone put out some quiet feelers for someone with the talent or training to take care of it."

"Infestation?" Harry asked. "You mean bugs? Magical termites or something?"

"Something like that," Allie said. "Wizarding houses have all sorts of things that need to be chased out before mundanes can move in: doxies, ghosts, gnomes, pixies... If it helps, just think of me as the

magical equivalent of the pied piper only without the silly clothes or pipe."

"And that's dangerous?"

"Just picture yourself as a gnomie in a nice, old, magical castle—or rather the rose garden since gnomes don't usually live inside—and then one day being told that you have to leave so that a non-magical family can take up residence," Allie said. "It's a lot less 'come follow me' and a lot more 'get out of here or else' with the power to back up the 'or else'."

"I see," Harry said.

"Probably not, but that's okay," Allie said. She glanced at the wall clock and sighed, "Which means I have to get going if we're going shopping tomorrow."

"Uh, Allie?" Harry asked as she turned to leave.

"Yes?"

"What was that bit about us calling you 'Alice'?" Harry asked. "And his calling you 'Thorne' when you said your name was 'Hawthorn'?"

Allie hesitated. "The Thornes are an old magical family, Harry, really old. They are also strictly matrilineal—inheritance is passed from mothers to daughters."

Harry nodded.

"The Matriarch, the head of the family, and her immediate family uses the 'Thorne' surname, but by family tradition those outside of one generation—children and siblings—have to use an associated name. That is, a family that married into the Thorne's and has since gone extinct with the Thorne's holding the best claim, or one of several traditional names used by cadet branches of the family. 'Hawthorn' has been customarily used by the Thorne Heir's family for five or six centuries."

"What Allie neglects to mention is that she will become Matriarch upon reaching her majority," Mr. Patil said. "She technically has the right to use the name, but has declined it until then."

"And 'Alice'?" Harry asked after a moment.

Allie shrugged, "I like it better than the name my mother gave me, and Alice is a name that's associated with the Thorne family."

She turned to Mr. Patil. "Thanks for helping us out, Chirag."

"It was my pleasure, Allie. Are you sure it is safe for you to return to your flat?"

"Yeah, I'll be all right," she snorted. "By now they've either broken out of the circle and left, or they're willing to be reasonable. If they aren't, I'll break their wands and call the bobbies and let them deal with it. Home invasion..." she shook her head and tsked twice.

He laughed, "Let us know if you require help."

"I will," she said somberly, then headed for the fireplace and disappeared in the same way Dumbledore had.

"So, uh, I guess I'll take care of dishes," Harry said.

"Nonsense, let the dishes take care of themselves," Mr. Patil said, pulling out his wand. "Watch." He rapped the table smartly with his wand. The dishes shivered. Then the dispensers and a platter with a solitary, somewhat sad-looking, pancake wandered off to put away leftovers. One glass began to hop around the table collecting the silverware, and the plates began to neatly stack themselves for washing.

"Now," he said, drawing Harry's attention away from the self-cleaning table service. "I'm sure you have many questions. Anjali and the girls will more than willing to help, starting," he grinned, "With finding you some appropriate robes to wear tomorrow."

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Albus stared gloomily into his fireplace. He could feel his plans starting to slip and he had no idea why other than suspect that she was involved, which was nonsense. Her magical signature was quite distinct. Matching it would have been simple if she'd ever visited

Harry before. Harry's family not telling him anything about magic had taken him initially by surprise, but on reflection it should not have. Petunia had lost her sister because of it, some fear was perfectly understandable. However, the hostility Harry displayed was surprising, as was the way he'd implied ugly things happening at the Dursley household.

That was nonsense of course, he'd exchanged regular owl-post with Arabella Figg and she hadn't reported anything like the bullying and lack of care by the Dursleys. After all, they left the boy with her, didn't they? Neglectful parents would have shut him up in the house if they'd both needed to be out for some errand or other. And the way he'd said that they wouldn't be worried about him...but he had taken care of that with a short letter to Petunia and added that he'd be spending the summer with the Patils. They were a good wizarding family and perhaps some acclimation to the wizarding world was in order. Petunia would no doubt be upset by Harry missing the last weeks of his muggle school, but she'd recognize the need for Harry to be comfortable in his next scholastic environment.

Which left the girl.

She had had a point about Draco Malfoy, he admitted, he was the son of a Death Eater convicted or not. But he didn't have the power to decline a person because of who their parents were or what they were accused of doing. Besides, the fact that their parents were Death Eaters made it even more imperative that they attend Hogwarts where they could have a safe, stable environment in which to grow and learn. They'd have a better chance of avoiding their parents' mistakes at Hogwarts than they would at Durmstrang which was where most of them would end up if they weren't accepted to Hogwarts.

In a way he'd been fortunate that few of the convicted Death Eaters had had children (or at least openly and acknowledged children) of school age. He could only imagine the flocks of owls he'd receive if he'd had to accept, say, Bellatrix Lestrange's daughter. Even if Ms. Thorne kept quiet about who her father was (which could hardly be expected since he was from a rather prominent pureblood family) it would come out sooner or later. It couldn't not come out.

And then there were her abilities. Most people whose magic expressed itself so specifically had a difficult time, at best, with

learning other types of magic and closing magical channels had very little to do with it. People who could wield all kinds of magic so naturally were the source of stories of mages. Trying to teach someone who had so different a way of actually performing magic would likely prove problematical and he could only speculate about the problems with her year-mates in regards to her greater age and the very different way of spell casting.

And none of those worries touched upon what her magic could actually do. Hormonal teenagers were hardly the sanest examples of humanity and she could seriously injure or perhaps even kill with a thought. Chirag, who Albus knew thought of her as a daughter or perhaps a favored niece, had been concerned enough to ask her to find somewhere else to live shortly after her eleventh birthday.

Chirag had reported that she had found a master to apprentice herself to, but had never given him a name. Worrying, especially since he had no way of knowing what else her master had taught her besides how to control her magic. Her mind had been blocked to him, not the normal shove of an Occlumens pushing out a Legimancy probe, but it was like looking into a dark well and not being able to see the bottom. He could feel her mind but he couldn't get even the most surface of thoughts, and as far as he could tell she hadn't even reacted to his gentle mind-probe and he was reluctant to put enough power into one so that he could.

He stood. He had told Harry that accommodations could and would be made for his friend, and, truth be told, a part of him had been very proud of the young man for standing up to him for his...friend, that way. But it meant his plans would have to change. He had no way of determining how the girl would influence Harry, but at the same time he had to make sure Harry attended Hogwarts.

The stone would still have to come to Hogwarts, of course. It had gotten too dangerous for it to be left out and exposed, even in someplace secure as Gringotts. Finding the mirror he was looking for was taking more time than he'd anticipated, but the other security measures were almost fully in place. Yes, the stone would be quite safe inside the walls of Hogwarts and Minerva's concerns aside there would only be a very slight risk to the students. It wouldn't be even as big a risk that would come with having Ms. Thorne attend.

Chapter 4: Once and Future

"Your true task has just begun, and you may not know in your life if you have succeeded in it, but only if you fail."

Peter S. Beagle, *The Last Unicorn*, Chapter XIV

The day of Harry's birthday dawned bright and clear, and for the first time since he had arrived he managed to beat the twins downstairs for breakfast.

The last three months had been the most exciting in his life. Everywhere in the house that he looked there was some piece of magic at work. Dishes that washed themselves and pictures that moved were just the beginning. There was a laundry basket that would sort clothes and load them in the washer, and an ironing board that not only ironed, but folded and sorted as well, and a pair of enchanted little garden gnomes—though not real garden gnomes Parvati insisted—that patrolled the garden and chased rabbits away from the growing carrots. Padma told him that there were some homes where everything was enchanted in some way or another to the point where electronics didn't work anywhere near them, but Harry found it hard to imagine if for no other reason than what would they use for lights? The Patils, and Allie for that matter, preferred a mixed household, using magic where magic was superior (and sometimes not even then) and mundane where magic was not.

Allie had no qualms about admitting that in her case it was due to her magic nullification wards requiring non-magical solutions if she didn't want to have to bathe in cold water. But in the case of the Patils it was largely because Mr. Patil was only second generation magical (Anjali came from a very long line of Indian witches) and firmly stated that the wizarding wireless couldn't be compared to the quality of mundane programming.

Easily Harry's favorite room in the house was the library. A two-story affair with book-case lined walls, a wooden floor, and a large fireplace that always had a log burning (though charmed not to give off heat in the warm summer). There were large red leather armchairs with brass tacks, an old-fashioned desk with a built-in inkwell, and a brass ladder that ran along the shelves so that you could reach the hard-to-reach books and, if you asked politely, would zoom around the room until you got dizzy and jumped off. It was also Padma's favorite room and while Harry read about the

magical world she would often curl up in another chair with a dusty old spellbook. Parvati—whose tastes ran towards old stories about Merlin and other magical heroes—tended to take her current book of choice to one of the upper limbs of a mammoth old oak tree in the back yard.

Reading wasn't the twins' only shared interest, but Harry quickly discovered that they tended to go about them very differently. Shortly after Allie left they had endeavored to teach him wizard chess which, as far as Harry could tell, was just like muggle chess only the pieces moved—and talked back at you—and bashed each other into pieces but would quickly pull themselves back together in time for the next game. Padma played a dizzying game of maneuver that would leave him confused about just what was the real attack, while Parvati's strategy usually came down to 'I attack it with my horsies'. He was privately certain that wasn't actually the way the game was supposed to be played, but it proved effective enough against Padma's often baffling strategies.

They also, he learned almost as quickly, both had an extensive list of cosmetic spells they were waiting to practice with (and their mother had apparently given up trying to talk them out of, if dinner conversations were anything to go by); but where Padma's contained mostly glamours and complex illusions, Parvati seemed to have a near-endless supply of simpler (and more specific) charms. And, much to Harry's dismay, neither of them had tried to disguise their interest in the young wizard who had come to live with him.

It had taken Padma only a few days of asking occasional questions to ferret out his home life (unpleasant), what he knew of the magical world (very little), and what he knew about Allie (not much more). But where Padma had asked, Parvati had spent almost a solid week watching him. To Harry it was uncomfortably similar to what Dudley and his friends had done while 'Harry Hunting', but aside from watching him she never actually did anything and after a while he learned to ignore it. When they had friends over, however, both would often spend hours huddled together giggling which never failed to produce a feeling of impending doom.

If Harry had expected to be left alone to sit in the library and read he'd been sorely mistaken. While it was true that he hadn't had to attend his mundane primary school anymore he quickly found himself being tutored in a number of subjects. From the twins there

was Parvati's endless exposé on what robes were in fashion and Padma's recital of great wizarding events of the past century. When he managed to get away from them Mrs. Patil had insisted that she teach him the rudiments of Latin—which formed the backbone of the incantations for most of the more common spells. Mr. Patil would often engage him in the evening by telling him about the magical world.

The breakfast dishes had cleared themselves away and Harry and the Patils had lined up to use the floo when Allie came through the fireplace dressed in one of her endless supply of band shirts and black jeans.

"Allie, you made it!" Harry said.

"Told you I would, didn't I?" she asked.

"Well, yes but—"

"But you didn't believe me," Allie said.

Harry looked away. "Sorry."

"You know what, Harry? I'm too happy today to be brought down by you," she said with a teasing smirk. "I'm going to Hogwarts, I'm getting my first wand, and later today there's going to be cake. You can stay here and mope through your birthday if you want, the rest of us will eat the cake for you."

"No you won't!" Harry said.

"What are you waiting for then?" she asked as the twins darted past and made for the fireplace. Their father stopped them with a smile and motioned for Harry.

Harry waited for Ms. Patil to go through first and then grabbed a handful of floo powder from the small pot and tossed it in the fire. "Diagon Alley!"

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Harry fell out of the fireplace into a pub that looked as though it had seen better days. He revised his initial impression as he struggled

back to his feet and dusted black soot from the 'Potter'-green dayrobes that he had bought the day after he'd come to live with the Patils. Merely saying that the pub had seen better days was giving it far too much credit. Three steps past being condemned would be much more accurate, he decided. There was a trio of old women sipping sherry from tiny glasses that looked like they hadn't been cleaned in at least a decade, a man in a corner smoking from a pipe that was far too long and issued pea green fumes, and the bartender bore a distinct similarity to a walnut.

The fire flared green behind him and Harry stepped out of the way as first Parvati, then Padma, came streaking out in red and blue streaks respectively (both somehow managing to stay on their feet despite the very obvious momentum that they carried through the fireplace with them); followed by Chirag at a much more sedate speed.

"Are we all here then?" he asked glancing around. His wife had managed to corral both of the twins.

"Allie's not," Harry said just as the door of the pub opened.

A silver bell, unconnected to the door, tinkled a merry little tune as Allie walked into the pub. The t-shirt promoted a band called Deep Purple, and the denim jacket from before was replaced with a long duster like Mr. Sullivan had worn, but otherwise she looked the same.

"There she is," Anjali said.

"Chirag," the bartender said, reaching for a glass. "Can I get you your usual?"

"Not today, Tom," Mr. Patil said. "We're just passing through, have a little shopping to take care of."

"Of course, of course," Tom said. "Hogwarts. It's that time again." He paused and peered at Allie and frowned slightly, "I didn't know you had an older daughter..."

"Friend of the family," Allie said.

Tom nodded and his gaze slide over to Harry, and fumbled the glass he was vainly trying to polish clean. "Sweet and Merciful Merlin," he said, leaning down over the bar as he peered at Harry. "Is this—can this be—?"

The bar went deathly silent.

"Why bless my soul, it is," the bartender said. "Harry Potter...what an honor."

He fumbled and a glass, an actually clean glass, almost fell to the floor before he recovered it. "Welcome back, Mr. Potter, welcome back," he said, seizing Harry's hands with his and pumping furiously over the bar while somehow managing to maintain control of the glass. "Let me get you something, on the house of course."

"We really can't," Mr. Patil began.

But it was too late. Harry never did get the drink Tom offered, but he was inundated by everyone else in the pub. A small man in a purple top hat that he vaguely remembered from one time that Aunt Petunia took him shopping, a rather large woman in yellow robes who kept coming back for a second handshake.

A young man with skin so pale it had a blue cast from the blood vessels beneath it stepped forward.

"Ah, Professor Quirrel," Mr. Patil said. "Harry, girls, Professor Quirrel will be one of your professors."

"M-Mister P-P-Potter," Quirrel said, taking Harry's hand in a death grip. "I c-can't say how p-p-pleased I am t-to m-meet you."

"What sort of magic do you teach, Professor?" Harry asked.

"D-Defense Against the D-D-Dark Arts," Quirrel shivered slightly, as though thinking of it was something he would very rather not do. "N-not that you need it m-much, eh, P-P-Potter?" He laughed nervously, his eyes flicking around and fixing on Allie.

Allie stared back at him, not at all amused, and her head cocked to one side in thought. "Fascinating," she murmured softly.

Quirrel jerked his eyes away from her, "G-getting all of y-your e-e-equipment, then?" he asked. "I-I've g-got to pick up a new b-book on v-v-vampires—" he expelled the word in a rush, "—myself." He looked terrified at the thought.

Harry saw Allie smile, and heard her ask: "Professor, might I get your opinion about..."

But the others wouldn't let Quirrel monopolize his time, Professor or not, and exactly what Allie was asking for an opinion on was lost in a crowd that eventually took her, all four of the Patils, and almost ten minutes to finally break him free of.

"What was that?" Harry asked as they walked out the backdoor of the pub.

"Your adoring public," Allie said with a sneer directed back towards the closed door. She shook her head, "I did tell you that you were famous, didn't I?"

"Well, yes, but..." he looked back at the door. "Is everyone going to be like that?"

"Probably," Allie said with a shrug. "Most of them at any rate."

"Wonderful," Harry muttered as the twins giggled. He looked around the alley that Mr. Patil had led them into. It was so old that it used actual paving stones instead of the asphalt that he expected of roads. The stones were badly worn, and weeds poked up, giving each stone its own frayed boarder of green. A pair of battered trashcans sat against the far wall of brick that was as ancient as the paving stones.

"Is Professor, uh, Quirrel always so nervous?" Harry asked as they walked down the alley.

"Yes, poor man," Mr. Patil said. "I was on the Board—"

"The Board?" Harry asked, then flushed as he realized he had interrupted.

"The Board of Governors of Hogwarts," Mr. Patil said. "Eight of the positions are permanent, held by various families. The other four

serve seven years and are elected by members of the alumni organization. I actually left the Board not two weeks ago.

"Professor Quirrel was an outstanding teacher, when he stuck to books." His thoughtful expression changed into a slight, worried frown, "he went on sabbatical last year to pick up some first hand experience. They say he got in trouble with a vampire, and then there was that business with a hag...he hasn't been the same since. He's scared of his subject, scared of his students," Mr. Patil shook his head, "I do hope that Dumbledore manages to find someone competent next year."

"Why didn't you use the floo?" Harry asked Allie as Mr. Patil headed down the alley to the far wall.

"The Leaky Cauldron floo hates me," Allie said.

"It hates you?" Harry repeated.

"It does, it really does," Padma said.

Her sister nodded in agreement, "There was one time when Mum asked her to help carry potion ingredients home and—"

"—and we agreed that incident was never to be spoken of," Allie cut Parvati off. "We all remember what happened last time it was spoken of, don't we?"

Parvati turned pale and suddenly became very interested in the cobblestones.

"Never been through the Leaky Cauldron entrance?" Allie asked Harry.

Harry shook his head as Mr. Patil walked up to the wall and pulled out his wand. "Last time we side-along apparated." He frowned, "That was really...weird."

"Apparating is like that," Allie said.

"Is that how you got here?"

"You have to be of age and be licensed in order to apparate, Harry," Allie said with a trace of her customary smirk. "Doing it underage and without a license is illegal."

"Three up," Mr. Patil said out loud as he tapped the bricks with the wand, "And two over." He tapped the wall three times with his wand.

For a moment nothing happened. The first brick folded back, then two more, then bricks were folding and sliding too quickly to keep track of. In moments the wall had transformed into a magnificent archway that soared overhead, and led out into a twisting, bending, cobblestone alley.

"Welcome, to Diagon Alley," Mr. Patil said as Allie reached back and flicked the hood of her coat up over her head.

Harry had only been in Diagon Alley briefly to draw some money and purchase a few robes. Even then most of his shopping had been in the mundane part of London. His recollection was of a few shops crammed together and a narrow space filled with people.

This entrance was perched above the main level of the alley so that you could see down it despite its crookedness until the turn after Gringotts. Everywhere Harry looked there were shops, carts where there wasn't room for shops, and throngs of people winding through wherever there wasn't a shop or room for a cart. There were cauldrons in scores of sizes and shapes and dozens of different metals, all for a hundred different purposes or more. A shop on the left featured a large eye painted in glowing pink paint on frosted glass, and several large stacks of boxes marked Crystal Balls in 10-, 12-, 14-, and 16-pound weights were out front with a cat perched lazily on top of the tallest stack.

A woman walked out of an apothecary right in front of them, muttering, "Dragon's liver, a galleon an ounce, they're mad..."

There was soft hooting coming from a low, dark building. Boys were clustered around a shop selling brooms. Everywhere Harry looked there were piles of books and scrolls, stacked barrels of newt eyes and bat wool, robes hung in the window of one shop, and piles of trunks were in the one next to it.

Mr. Patil hurried them up the street to a building, taller and straighter than the others, and made of white stone that gleamed in the morning sunlight. A short creature—a full head shorter than Harry—dressed in a scarlet and gold uniform with a dark, swarthy face, and a long, twisting beard, pulled open a burnished bronze door.

Harry nodded politely to the goblin, noting fingers and feet that were much too long. The creature smiled, revealing rows of sharp teeth, and bowed back to Harry. Harry glanced at Allie who had also nodded, though a short, curt, nod, at the creature.

"Goblins," she muttered admiringly as they were confronted with a second set of doors.

Harry looked up. They were broad and high, though smaller than the enormous outer doors, and made of silver. A short poem was burned into the metal, and seemed to be a warning against theft.

"You'd have to be pretty stupid to try and rob this place," Allie said.

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Goblins," she repeated. "And magic," she nodded at the doors as they were pulled open by two more goblins. "That's a kind of ward: contract too, for that matter. You read it, you give it power. Every time you read it you give it a little more. It forms a magical contact of sorts between you and the goblins. Lots of wizards and witches use this place; every time they come in they read it, most of them. Each time it grows a little stronger. After a couple of hundred years..."

She shrugged. "Not only is it a warding and a contract, but the thing also invokes Guest Laws by welcoming you as a stranger, and it lays out a specific condition of guest-rights."

Her voice trailed off as Harry turned his attention to Gringotts. They were in a large marble hall. Marble columns held up the ceiling far above him. A long, high counter made of expensive woods formed a long U-shape down the length of the room behind which sat goblins; goblins counting gleaming metal coins, goblins writing in large, thick books, goblins measuring bars of metal on brass scales, or peering through eye-pieces at glittering gems.

Mr. Patil led them to a free goblin at the counter.

"Yes?" the goblin asked in a low voice with a slight sibilant accent.

"We're here to make some withdrawals," Chirag said. "The Patil Vault, Harry Potter's Vault, and—"

"Allison Boxthorn's vault," Allie interjected.

Harry looked at her, "Out of curiosity, how many names do you have?"

"Later," she said.

Harry nodded warily.

"Do you have your keys, Sir? Ma'am?"

Mr. Patil produced two small bronze keys. "Dumbledore fire-called early this morning to give me yours, Harry," he said, turning to Harry.

Allie produced a similar key and handed it to the goblin.

The goblin peered closely at the keys Mr. Patil had given him, then nodded and handed them back, "Very well, these are in order." He picked up Allie's key and peered at it, then he peered at Allie for a moment and frowned slightly. He stroked the key, almost petting it, with a solitary finger. He finally nodded, "Very well, Ms. Boxthorn." He turned back to Mr. Patil. "I will have a goblin take you down," he paused. "The carts only hold four."

"Harry can come down with me," Allie said.

Mr. Patil nodded.

"Dropcleft, Griphook, take these people down to their vaults," the goblin said as two more goblins appeared at their elbows.

"This way," one said, leading them to a door.

Harry wasn't sure what he expected to see, but the narrow stone corridor wasn't it. It sloped downward, lit by torches in iron brackets on the walls. The air became damp, and then the passage widened as it came to a stop. There were dark holes in the walls to the left

and right, and what seemed to be a set of narrow railway tracks connected the two. One of the goblins—Griphook, he thought—whistled and a pair of carts came zooming out of the right-hand passage.

Allie led him to the one in back.

"Keep your arms, legs, and any other body parts you wish to remain attached, inside the cart," Griphook said.

"What does he mean, 'attached'?" Harry asked. Since he had wanted some money changed the last time the entire transaction had been completed at one of the counters and he hadn't needed to go down to the vaults.

"Just what it sounds like," Allie said. "I suggest you hang on," she added, grabbing a bar on the back of the front seats.

Harry was about to ask her why, when his question was answered. Both carts hurtled into the tunnel so quickly that Harry was slammed back into his seat. They started a sharp left turn that was as much down as it was left, and only Allie sitting next to Harry kept him from pitching out. Then they were hurtling straight again, more tracks branching off of theirs as the two carts hurtled along. Left, right, right left, left, middle path, too quickly for Harry to keep track and the Patil's cart in front zoomed up as the track climbed and it shifted in time for their cart to go plummeting down instead. They passed over an underground lake that glowed faintly blue, its surface as smooth as glass.

The cart slammed to a halt in front of a small alcove in the passage wall. Inside the alcove was a metal door with a single keyhole in the center. Griphook hopped out of the cart and walked over to the vault door. "Your key, sir," he said to Harry.

Harry climbed out of the cart, followed by Allie. He pulled his new key out of his robes and handed it to the goblin.

Griphook took it and placed it in the lock, then twisted it once to the right and the vault door popped out into the alcove and inch or two. For a moment nothing happened, then with a hissing sound venomous green smoke poured from the edges of the vault.

Griphook stepped back, "A quarter turn to the left, if you please, Mr. Potter."

Harry walked up to the door and pulled on the key, it was stuck fast.

"A quarter turn to the left," the goblin repeated testily.

Harry turned the key and the door sank back into its former position. Then, with a grinding sound, it rolled out of sight to the left. For a moment the vault was concealed in darkness. Then a gentle glow illuminated the room. He didn't know how much the mounds of gold and silver coins were worth, but he didn't need to. There were so many of them that he knew that whatever their value he was rich.

"The silver ones are Sickles, seventeen of them make a Galleon, those are the gold ones," Allie said. "The bronze ones are Knuts, twenty-nine of them to a Sickle. It's easy enough, once you memorize it."

Allie produced a bag and Harry bent and scooped some money into it. "So what's your real name?" Harry asked. "Alice Hawthorn or Allison Boxthorn?"

"If you mean, which is the name I was born with, then neither," Allie said. "I used the Hawthorne growing up since my mother was the Thorne heir. Now she, and my grandmother for that matter, are both dead—well, Grandmother might as well be but that's neither here nor there—but Granny-dearest and I never got along and she made it so I can't touch most of my trust accounts until I'm of age at which point I become Matriarch making the whole point moot.

"I use Rune Thornberry for my business dealings, since it isn't one of the names the Thorne cadet branches use and I'd just as soon not have people link my job and talents to me and my family. I used to use Andrea Brickle in the mundane world until, well, let's just say that the mundanes think she's dead. The goblins could care less about what name you want to use—in fact you don't even need to give them a name if you don't want to—but I found it easier to just use one vault thus Allison Boxthorn. But since Hogwarts was one of the things I can actually tap my trust funds for I can use the old Hawthorn family vault..." she shrugged.

"And that's legal?" Harry asked, then added as he lifted the bag, "Do you think this is enough?"

Allie shrugged, "It's a gray area. The goblins, as I said, don't care. To the wizarding world I live in the mundane, and to the mundane I live in the wizarding." She glanced at the bulging money bag. "Yeah, I'd say that'll last you a while."

"So what are you going to use at Hogwarts?" Harry asked as they went back to the cart.

"Something Blackthorn, I think," Allie said. "'Allie' is a diminutive of my real first name which is just as well, and Dumbledore knows me as Blackthorn, did before he knew I was a Thorne." she grimaced.

"Then why did you use Hawthorne?"

"I panicked," she said tightly. "How old a family is and how long it's been magical are...important in some circles. It used to be that the Thorne's were regarded with a considerable amount of respect. When I found out he was coming I blanked so I threw out the most impressive legal identity I have...and told him that I was the next Lady of Thornes, though I'd be surprised if he didn't know that already."

She shook her head. "Anyway, I need to come up with yet another first name it seems."

"Alice?" Harry suggested as they headed back to the cart.

Allie made a face. "I never really cared for that name, and as I said, I like to keep my identities separate. What would you think of Alexandria?"

"Isn't that a city?" Harry asked.

Allie shrugged as she climbed in.

"What about Allison?" he asked as he joined her, "I like that one."

Allie shook her head, "I already use that one too. Elissa was fairly commonly among the Blackthorns, if I remember correctly. What do you think?"

How was he supposed to respond to that? Harry wondered. "It sounds nice enough," he said awkwardly.

"Okay, I'll probably use that then," she said as Griphook entered the cart again, and once more it took off down the tracks.

"What about the Potters?" Harry asked over the rushing of the wind.

"What do you want to know?" Allie asked.

"Um, history, I guess."

"Old family, ten, eleven hundred years old," she said. "I'm not sure if they actually pre-date the Norman invasion but that's around the time they really started to grow into prominence. Historically they weren't so much against dark magic as they were against the irresponsible use of magic, a distinction that is lost on most people today and a policy that shifted in the last couple centuries. They are very prominent in light circles. They tend to produce powerful wizards and witches, and are known for their fair-play and honesty."

"Wow, all that?" Harry asked.

Allie shrugged. "I know something about most of the really old wizarding families. It was more or less expected of me. But it's not something I'm expert in. There are some families where being able to recite your entire lineage—and all of their major accomplishments—is practically mandatory, along with memorizing the highlights of all the other old families."

"What?" Harry asked as she fell silent.

"My father's family was...one of those lineage-obsessed families, I mean. I never got the whole story but I know that they were prominent supporters of dark magic, and they liked Voldemort's anti-mundane and mundane-born stance."

"And he was captured and thrown in prison," Harry said.

"That came later," she said tightly. "Personally I don't think he got half of what he deserved, but then, I'm biased."

"Why?" Harry asked. "I mean, if he's your father."

Allie looked at him for a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity. "Harry...sometimes family can be the most wonderful thing...and other times it can be a person's living hell. The man had no concept of responsibility, he broke his oaths more than once, he killed a lot of people, and in the end he was stupid enough to do it front of witnesses that couldn't be killed or memory-wiped or bought off. And maybe, despite all of that, I could have forgiven him. But along the way he broke my mother's heart and I had to listen to her lamenting him every day until she finally wasted away and died.

"So as it is..." she shrugged. "He got a life sentence in Azkaban, and I'm willing to settle for that. Of course, if he ever gets out, I'll kill him."

"I...um, I'm sorry?" Harry asked, not quite sure how to respond. It was hard trying to imagine hating a parent so much that he'd want to kill them.

Allie didn't respond as they zoomed through twisting tunnels that all looked the same, one time a cart zoomed past on another track going back the way they had come...except that the track was on the ceiling.

"Was that cart on the ceiling?" Harry asked.

"No," Grphook turned and flashed pointy teeth at them in what might generously be called a smile. "The surface is that way," he gestured at the track flashing past beneath them.

"Oh," Harry said rather softly as the cart stopped in front of another vault.

They got out, and Allie handed her key to the Griphook. He took it and slid it into the lock, and Allie twisted it open.

"If you don't mind my asking," Harry said, noticing that Allie's vault was significantly less full than his, and most of what she had were the silver and bronze coins but she did have at least several dozen of the gold galleons too. "Why is it that you put our keys into the vault locks rather than having us do it for ourselves, er, Mr. Griphook?"

"Just Griphook," the goblin stated. "We do not use your human titles."

"Griphook, then," Harry said.

"Security," Griphook said.

"He does not understand, Griphook," Allie said, offering the goblin two of the gold pieces.

"Not many do," Griphook said with a toothy smile, leading them back to the cart.

Once more they went zooming along the tracks that seemed to go every which way except towards the surface. Harry saw a flash of orange down a side tunnel with a brief rush of heat that was gone as quickly as they had past it.

"Was that a—"

"Dragon?" Allie finished for him.

"Security," Griphook repeated.

"Um," Harry wanted to ask Allie about her exchange with Griphook, but with the goblin sitting right in front of them...

"Ask," Griphook said.

"Excuse me?"

"You are ignorant, but not so arrogant as to revel in your ignorance. Ask."

"What do you want to know, Harry?" Allie asked.

"Um...well, it seemed that you and Griphook were saying one thing, but meaning something other than what I heard."

"Goblins have their own culture, Harry," Allie told him. "Older than most human cultures, in fact. I think I told you that the magical community likes to stick to itself?"

Harry nodded, and when he realized that she hadn't seen it because of the jerking of the cart he added: "Yes, you have."

"Well, the Ministry of Magic is run by humans, and it, or at least some of those inside it at least, regard non-humans the same way it regards mundane humans. The ones that it doesn't regard as merely being 'beneath' them it regards as worse. Most wizards and witches share that attitude."

"You've studied their culture?" Harry asked.

"I know enough to do be polite while doing business," Allie said. "A half-dozen phrases and a few old customs, nothing more."

"Which is more than most wizards or witches know," Griphook said.

"So, security...what happens if a witch or wizard puts their key in?" Harry asked.

"The same thing if they tried to access a vault that they weren't authorized to use," Griphook said. "They get sucked inside."

"And then what...you come and take them into custody?"

Griphook twisted in his seat so that he could stare at Harry and grin nastily. "Eventually."

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The Patils were waiting for them when they returned to Gringotts proper. With them was the largest person Harry had ever seen. He had to be at least ten feet tall, and was broader than Harry was tall.

"Harry," Mrs. Patil called, noticing them as they approached. "Harry, this Rubeus Hagrid. He's the Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts."

"Arry!" the giant man said, his ham-like hand swallowing Harry's whole as he pumped Harry's arm. "Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," he confided. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mum's eyes."

"You knew my parents?" Harry asked.

"Did I know yer parents?" Hagrid asked. "'Course I knew yer parents. Everyone knew yer parents. Me? I was the one tha' found you and pulled you out of yer house after, well, You-Know-Who killed 'em."

"You-Know-Who?" Harry asked. "You mean Voldemort?"

Mrs. Patil hissed and Hagrid seemed to whimper slightly as he looked wildly around. Mr. Patil's lips were pressed into a vaguely disapproving, look. Allie, on the other hand, gave one of her not-quite smirks.

"You said his name." Parvati looked impressed.

Her sister looked very disapproving. "Daddy won't let us."

"I should say not," Hagrid said. "And yer should know not to say his name."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Because the Ministry didn't bother to finish the job and a lot of his followers still walk free," Allie said. "And because ten years after he bit the big one people are still scared of him." She smiled, "And they should be scared, 'cause nobody ever found a body."

"Allie," Mr. Patil said, making her name a warning.

Hagrid frowned, at her. "'S'not really yer place ter be talkin' 'bout tha', Allie."

"I thought you didn't agree with them," Allie nodded towards the witches and wizards going about their business.

"I don'," Hagrid said. "Don' mean I go startin' a panic."

"But," Harry began, "if he's gone, then why..." he shrugged, unsure how to finish his question.

"Are people still afraid to speak his name?" Mr. Patil asked. "They do not speak it because he was so terrible that almost ten years

after his death they are still afraid to speak it for fear that he will hear his name and come for them."

"Oh," Harry said softly.

"So what are you doin' in the Alley, Allie?" Hagrid seemed as amused by the feeble joke as he was eager to change the topic, and Allie gave a sigh of long-suffering patience.

"I'm starting this year, Hagrid," she said softly.

"Tha's great news, Allie!" Hagrid said in a loud voice. "I though', I mean—"

"I know," Allie said. "Still...it is good news, Hagrid."

"It was the righ' thing ter do," Hagrid said. "Dumbledore probably jus' needed ter convince the Governors is all."

"Why are you here, Hagrid?" Mrs. Patil asked curiously.

"Secret business for Dumbledore," Hagrid said. "He trusts me. Important business, needs me ter clear ou' a Gringotts' vault fer 'im, Vault 713."

"Then we will delay you no further," Mr. Patil said. "Good day, Rubeus."

"And a fine day ter you too!" Hagrid proclaimed. "G'day, Harry," he added, then strolled off towards the counters.

"So where to first?" Harry asked as they left the bank and Hagrid behind them.

"Magic Books," Padma said.

"Wand," Parvati said.

They glared at each other

"Uniforms," Mrs. Patil said, pointing across the street at Madam Milkin's Robes for All Occasions.

The twins traded looks, looked at Harry, and then back at each other. They nodded in agreement, grabbed Harry by his arms, and charged off down the alley.

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Harry remembered Madam Milkin's Robes for all Occasions from the first time he was in the alley, and it was to that store that the twins dragged him inside.

Madam Milkin, a short, frumpy witch, glanced up at them from a blond boy perched on a stool. "Hello, Parvati, Padma, finally ready for Hogwarts?" she asked with a smile that disappeared as she turned back to the boy on the stool without waiting for an answer. "Hold still."

The boy scowled, but turned back from staring at them.

"Adrianna!" the witch called.

A tall witch, much younger than Madam Milkin, in sleek robes a vibrant, eye-watering combination of neon orange and bright lime green, emerged from behind a curtain. "Yes, Madame Milkin?" she asked.

"Take Padma and Parvati and start getting them fitted for Hogwarts robes," Milkin said. She turned to Harry as the twins followed the assistant, "Hogwarts, dear?"

Harry nodded.

"Right then, hop up on that stool," she gestured next to the boy she was fitting and a stool hopped over from a stack.

Harry nervously stepped up onto the stool as a third witch arrived from the back room with a long black robe which she dropped over Harry's head.

"So you are going to Hogwarts too?" the boy asked.

"Yes," Harry said.

"My father is next door buying books, and my mother is up the street looking at wands," the boy said in a bored, nasal, faintly drawling voice. "Then I'm going to drag them off to look at racing brooms. I don't see why first years can't bring one, I've been flying for ages. I think I'll bully father into buying me a new one and smuggle it in somehow."

Harry was reminded of Dudley. A smaller, thinner version of Dudley.

"Do you have a broom?" the boy asked.

"No," Harry said.

"Play Quidditch?"

"No," Harry said again.

That was as far as his interest in Harry went, it appeared, because the boy began to talk about himself again. "I do. Father says it would be criminal if I wasn't selected for my house team, and I must say, I agree," the boy smiled in a way that suggested he couldn't imagine anyone disagreeing. "Do you know what house you're going to be in?"

"I wasn't informed in my letter," Harry said. It was a nice, logical answer, that didn't keep him from feeling even stupider.

"No one is told, of course," the boy said. "We aren't even supposed to know until we get there, but I do. I'll be in Slytherin, all our family has been—imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?"

"Uh—" Harry managed, but the boy was less interested in Harry's answer than he was in Harry listening to him.

Hagrid walked by outside in his moleskin coat with a grimy package under one arm.

"Say, look at that man," the boy said.

"That's Hagrid, he works at Hogwarts," Harry said.

"Oh, I've heard about him. He's a servant of some kind, isn't he?"

"He's the Gamekeeper," Harry said.

"Exactly," the boy said, as though Harry had agreed with him. "I've heard he's some kind of savage—lives in a hut on the grounds, and twice a term gets drunk, tries to do magic, and sets something important on fire."

"I think he's brilliant," Harry said coolly. Yes Hagrid was big, and acted sort of bumpish, but he was apparently a friend of his parents and Chirag and Allie both seemed to like him. Allie didn't seem to call a person 'friend' easily, which made Hagrid even more special.

"Do you?" the boy asked with a slight sneer. "Is he with you? Where are your parents?"

"He's not with me," Harry said tightly. "And my parents are dead."

"Sorry," the boy couldn't have purposely have managed to sound less sorry. "They were our kind, weren't they?"

"They were a witch and wizard, if that's what you mean," Harry said.

"I really don't think they should let the other kind in, do you? They just aren't the same. They haven't been brought up with our ways, our history, our traditions. Why, some of them have never even heard of Hogwarts before they get their letters! Can you imagine such a thing? I think they should keep it in the old wizarding families. What's your surname, anyway?"

Harry was saved by Allie entering the shop, followed by Patils.

Madam Milkin looked up from Harry, "Padma and Parvati are with Adrianna in the back," she said. She turned to Allie, "I can be with you in a moment."

"No hurry," Allie said. "I can wait until my friend is done."

"Hogwarts student?" Madam Milkin asked curiously as she worked on Harry's robes. "Do you need a lengthening or—"

"I will be requiring Hogwarts robes, no house badge," Allie said. "I have yet to be sorted."

Madam Milkin frowned. "You're a little old to be—" she paused, and then asked, "Apprentice sash?"

"Yes, but keep it separate," Allie said. "My schooling over the past several years was non-standard. I am regularizing my education now, but..." she shrugged slightly.

"I understand," Madam Milkin said, though it was clear that she didn't. "What field, dear?"

"Basic-arts, white," Allie said.

Madam Milkin looked up from the piece of parchment she was writing on.

"I didn't move beyond basic arts before this... opportunity occurred," Allie explained. "But border it with whatever color belongs to the combined fields of wards and ritual magic—I think it's periwinkle but I may be wrong, the book I looked in was old and the ICW put out a revised international standard only a few years back. I already have the appropriate insignia."

"Very well," Madam Milkin said. "Will there be anything else?"

Allie nodded, "I am going to require several other robes. Most of my current wardrobe is not suitable to the climate where Hogwarts is and those that I do have are much worn."

"I can have your school robes ready today," Madam Milkin assured her. "But today is so busy that I'm not sure I can get to them."

"Nor would I expect you to. Would two weeks suffice?"

"Perfectly, barring any extraordinary requests, of course."

"Excellent."

"All done with you now," the witch working on the boy next to Harry said.

Harry waited until the boy had left the shop, then turned to Allie. "Apprentice sash?"

"Exactly what it sounds like," Allie said. Madam Milkin's assistant dropped a robe over her head and began pinning it to the correct length, "A sash that designates apprentice status. Most witches and wizards don't bother with apprentices any more, choosing an education at Hogwarts instead."

"And since you didn't go to Hogwarts," Harry said, "You were apprenticed instead?"

"Exactly," Allie said.

Harry shook his head in exasperation, first the twins, now this. He was rewarded by a pin pricking him in the neck. "Allie, what is Quidditch? I've heard Padma and Parvati talk about it, mostly about players, but I don't..." he hesitated, then shrugged helplessly, wincing as a pin pricked at a shoulder.

"Quidditch is a sport," Allie said. "It's played up in the air on brooms, and is followed, in most of the world, the same way that football is followed in the mundane. There are four balls, six goals, and two teams of seven players each."

"Sounds dangerous," Harry said after Chirag had explained a bit more.

"Eh," Allie said. "I think the last recorded fatality in an official game was more than a hundred years ago. Broken bones, concussions, I understand that those are a lot more common...and every so often a referee disappears and turns up later in the Sahara desert." She frowned in concentration, then shook her head, "and that exhausts my knowledge of the game. Personally I've always favored rugby."

"And Hogwarts houses?"

"There are four, one named for each of Hogwarts' founders," Allie said.

"They are Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin," Mr. Patil added. "Students are sorted based upon what qualities each of the Founders prized most. Ravenclaw prized intellect and wit, Hufflepuff preferred loyalty and hard work, Gryffindor prized the brave, and Slytherin the ambitious and cunning."

"And there wasn't a wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin," the witch who was working on Allie's robe said. "Or witch, for that matter."

"No?" Allie asked in a tone that Harry would have pegged as 'conversational', only he was pretty sure that Allie didn't have a purely conversational tone.

"Allie," Cherig said.

Allie looked at him and frowned, but she didn't continue.

The rest of the fitting was done in tense silence as Harry wondered once again about what secrets his new friend carried.

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"What was that about?" Harry asked as they left.

"The reason why I live on the fringe of the magical world rather than the mainstream," Allie said. "Well, a symptom of one of the reasons."

Harry started to ask more, but a tall figure, looking much like he thought a vampire would look, emerged from the crowd and would have walked into, or perhaps over, him if Allie hadn't pulled him out of the way.

"Watch where you are going, boy," the man said, peering down at Harry. His black robes billowed around him like inky shadows cast by a flickering candle. His pale face was framed by dark hair that hung thick and greasy to his shoulders.

"Professor Snape," Mr. Patil said cheerfully. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"I had to arrange for my stocks to be refilled from last year," the man said in a soft, silky voice, "As well as for a few...unique ingredients for my personal stocks."

Mr. Patil's face brightened, "You think you found the answer to that contamination problem that was plaguing your last series of experiments?"

"Perhaps," the Professor allowed. He looked over the children, "You've mentioned your twins, often enough, who's are these?"

"Padma, Parvati, this is Professor Snape, he teaches potions," Mr. Patil said, ignoring the impatient look the man gave him. "Professor, these are—"

"Elissa Blackthorn, sir," Allie interjected. "I will be starting this year."

"A little old, aren't you?" the Professor asked coolly.

"Yes, sir," Allie agreed. "I was apprenticed at an early age, since my Master chose to focus on wards and runes I'm sadly lacking in basic magical arts. With Headmaster Dumbledore's permission I am taking steps to correct that."

"I see..." he turned to Harry, "And you?"

"Harry Potter, sir," Harry said.

Something that might have been distaste or disgust flickered across the man's features, and then disappeared again. He started to turn back to Mr. Patil.

"Er, Professor?" Harry asked.

"What is it, Potter?" the man snapped.

"Um, well, my class list of supplies said crystal or glass phials," Harry said. "Which would you recommend?"

Professor Snape stopped, then slowly turned and peered down at Harry from behind a rather long nose. His face a perfectly blank, emotionless, mask. After about half a minute he straightened and tersely said, "Crystal."

"Thank you," Harry said.

Snape grimaced, but gave a very sharp, very short, nod.

"Uh, can you recommend a, er, an apothecary?" Harry asked, working his way around the unfamiliar word.

"Pennyforthe's Potion Provisions," the Potions Professor said. "It is at the end of the alley. It is small and somewhat expensive, but the quality is excellent. I would suggest you ask for his first year potion's supply kit. At least that way you won't lose anything with your socks or get lint in your black beetle eyes." He turned abruptly, his robes whirling about him, and stalked off up the Alley towards the Leaky Cauldron.

"Charming fellow," Allie said.

"He can be a bit rigid, but he knows his potions," Mr. Patil said. "One of the youngest Potion Masters in history; absolutely top in his field. I never understood why he decided to teach rather than do private research. He grows on you though, after a while."

Allie glanced at Harry, "Like mold."

Harry stifled a laugh.

Mr. Patil took them to a shop that specialized in trunks. After looking over everything from a set of matching luggage, each with multiple compartments, to a steamer trunk that could hold a not-so-small library's worth of books, Harry settled for a trunk with only one compartment, but was somewhat bigger inside and out with charm on it that made it lighter than normal. Allie proclaimed it a very fine trunk, but declined to buy one of her own.

All four took Professor Snape up on his recommendation for potion supplies in a shop that smelled of dried spices. Small crystal jars were filled with everything from aconite to zebra parts in various states ranging from dried to potted, brined to tainted, and from abraded to whole. Most of the items had multiple versions from different countries or regions. Separate jars were filled with each so that a customer could open and smell the various ingredients, or run them between fingers to test consistency. One entire wall was given over to shelves of jars filled with once-living things in various fluids. Horns, claws, teeth, and feathers hung in bundles on strings from the ceiling, as did bundles of dried herbs. Harry joined the Patil twins in examining silver unicorn horns (21 galleons each), and after

asking the wizard behind the counter he bought several small jars of the more commonly used ingredients that weren't part of the first-year potion kit while Allie purchased a small parchment envelope filled with dried pufferfish spines.

"Which just leaves us with wands and books," Mr. Patil said as they left the apothecary.

"Wands," Parvati said.

"Books," Padma returned.

They glared at each other.

"Odds," Parvati said, making a fist.

Both twins shook their fists three times, then Parvati held out two fingers and Padma held out none. Parvati said a rude word, to which her sister stuck out her tongue and then both took off before their parents could respond.

Anjali shook her head and set off after them.

"We'll go get our wands," Allie told Mr. Patil.

"As you wish," he said. "Meet us at Fortescue's after you are done shopping?"

"Of course," Allie said.

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Allie led him down Diagon Alley to a narrow and shabby shop. A solitary wand rested on a much worn purple pillow in the dusty window, and a peeling sign on the door said that the Ollivanders had been making wands for almost twenty-four hundred years.

Inside the shop wasn't much better. Long shelves, so close together that Harry had a hard time imagining himself, much less an adult, being able to move between them were packed to over-flowing with long, thin boxes. A thick layer of dust covered everything. A bell tinkled somewhere deep in the shelves and stacks of boxes, and aside from a solitary, rather spindly chair, the front area was

deserted. Harry felt like he'd walked into a rather strict library...only that wasn't quite it. It was as though the silence was part of the nature of the place, not exactly a rule, but something that no person who walked into the shop would dare even dream of violating.

"Good afternoon."

Harry jumped, Allie, he noticed, did not.

A tall, painfully thin, old man peered down at them. His eyes, behind very round glasses, shimmered like twin little moons in the hallowed gloom of the shop.

"Ah, yes," the man said. "Yes, yes. I thought I'd be seeing you soon, Harry Potter," it wasn't a question. "You have your mother's eyes. It seems only yesterday, that she was in my shop buying her first wand. Ten and one quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow, particularly fine for charms work."

Ollivander moved closer to Harry. Harry wished he could blink, those silvery eyes were creepy.

"Your father, on the other hand, favored mahogany. Eleven inches. Pliable. A little more power and excellent for transfiguration. Well, I say your father favored it—really it is the wand that chooses the wizard, or witch, you know."

Mr. Ollivander had slowly walked towards Harry while saying this, and now leaned so close that Harry could see himself reflected in those shimmering, misty, eyes. One long, pale finger reached out and stroked along his scar. "And that is where..."

He straightened slightly, "I'm sorry to say that I sold the wand that did it. Thirteen and a half inches, yew, phoenix feather core...powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands...well, if I had known what that wand was going out into the world to do..."

He shook his head, and then, to Harry's immense relief, spied Allie.

"Ms. Hawthorne...I must confess, I never expected you to arrive in my shop again," he said. "As it is, Albus owled me earlier to tell me that he had decided to accept you into Hogwarts. I remember your mother coming in...for both of her wands, actually. The first one was

a particularly fine hawthorn wand, I was sorry to hear of its destruction. Her second was rowan, stiff, excellent for defensive magic. Your father—"

"Is best not spoken of," Allie growled. "And it's Blackthorn."

Ollivander paused and raised one nearly non-existent eyebrow, "As you wish." He turned back to Harry and procured a small measuring tape inscribed with silver markings. "Let us start with you, Mr. Potter..." he turned and disappeared into the stacks of wands as the tape began measuring Harry on its own. "Which is your wand hand?" his voice floated from among the shelves as the tape measure measured between Harry's eyes.

"Er, well, I'm right handed," Harry said. Immediately the tape measure began measuring the length of the arm, then elbow to armpit, length from second joint to the tip of his right ring finger...

"Each Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance," Ollivander's voice said. "We use dragon heartstrings, phoenix tail-feathers, and the tail hairs of unicorns. Each wand is unique, as each dragon, unicorn, and phoenix is unique. And you will never get so good results with another wizard's wand."

The tape measure, by this point, was measuring the distance between Harry's nostrils and Mr. Ollivander's voice proclaimed: "That will do." The tape measure flopped limply on the floor as Ollivander emerged with a small stack of boxes.

"Right then, Mr. Potter," Ollivander said, pressing a wand into his hand, "Try this one. Beech-wood and dragon heartstring. Nine inches. Nice and flexible. Give it a wave."

Harry, feeling rather foolish, waved it around a bit, but Ollivander snatched it out of his hand.

"No, no—try this one. Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy. Try—"

But Harry had barely tried before "Ebony and unicorn hair. Eight and a half inches, springy," was forced into his hand, and just as quickly snatched back out.

He tried wand after wand. Some he actually managed to wave, others he barely had time to touch before they were discarded again. The stack of discarded boxes was starting to resemble every other stack of boxes, and Harry wondered briefly as he waved willow and dragon heartstring—twelve inches, bendable—if every other stack of boxes was made from failed wands from a previous person looking for a wand.

"No, no, that won't do at all," as Ollivander reclaimed 'Poplar and unicorn, nine and five-eighths inches, intractable'. He examined Harry for a moment, "Tricky customer, eh?" he asked. "Don't fret, I'll find a wand for you, I always do, you know. Hmm...I wonder," his eyes gleamed speculatively, then he disappeared behind the stacks again and emerged with a rather dusty box.

"An unusual combination, holly and phoenix feather," Ollivander said. "Eleven inches, supple."

Harry took the wand, and felt a warm rush that started at his fingers and flowed up his arm and through him as he held it. After a moment he gave it a swish and a flurry of multi-hued sparks burst from the tip, sending lights dancing against the walls in the dusty shop.

"Curious, very curious," Ollivander said.

Harry looked up from his wand, "What's curious?"

Ollivander fixed Harry with an owl-like stare, "I remember every wand I've sold in this shop, Mr. Potter, every one. As it happens, the phoenix whose tail feather resides in the core of your wand only gave one other feather—just one. It is curious that you should be destined for this wand, while its brother—why, its brother gave you that scar."

Harry swallowed.

"Yes, thirteen and a half inches. Yew. Curious how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, remember. I think we can expect great things from you, Mr. Potter. After all, You-Know-Who did great things; terrible, yes, but great."

Harry shivered, not certain he liked Mr Ollivander any more.

"Hey!"

Harry heard something flop as he turned around to find Allie giving the tape measure, now coiled up on the floor, a rather dark look.

"Er, yes, you next," Ollivander said, reaching for a box. "Let's see, I think we'll start with ash and dragon heartstring..."

Allie gave the wand a short wave, and the stack of wand boxes holding Harry's rejects was scattered over most of the shop with a small 'boom'.

"Obviously not," Ollivander said, reclaiming the wand before anything else could happen.

Harry watched as Allie's stack of discarded wand boxes surpassed his own. With each failed wand Mr. Ollivander seemed to get more and more excited until he nearly seemed to be bouncing.

"Tricky, very tricky," he burbled happily, disappearing once more into the shelves. Despite the piles of boxes the shelves seemed to still be as full as ever. "Let's see...oh, another rare combination," he emerged with another dusty box, "Cypress and phoenix tail feather."

Allie picked it up and waved it, there was a shower of sparks; but they were wane and feeble compared to the blast Harry had managed to produce.

"Very nearly, but not quite," Ollivander hummed as he took the wand back and examined it minutely. "Occasionally a witch or wizard comes into their magic late and has a great deal of difficulty in finding a suitable wand."

"I didn't get a wand as early as I could have so I have the opposite problem," Allie said.

"Indeed," Ollivander said. "Why wands make the choices they do continue to elude even the brightest of minds. Fortunately, however, the choice is not entirely random. Body size and conformation, heritage, the propensity for certain magics—charms, for example, in the case of your mother, Mr. Potter—innate capacity for magic..."

"That's what the tape measure was measuring?" Harry asked.

"In part, Mr. Potter, in part," Ollivander told him.

"And from these you can tell what kind of wand would be best for a wizard?"

"Most likely to choose a wizard, yes," the wandmaker replied. "You, Mr. Potter, will find unicorn-hair wands difficult to use, and find those of holly, yew, mistletoe, and perhaps lindenwood, the most responsive."

"And me?" Allie asked.

"If I had one I would be most interested in seeing your reaction to a wand made of *Acacia drepanolobium*," Ollivander told her. "The whistling thorn of east Africa. Alas, I do not. It has never been a favored wood in these parts and I have not had a chance to work with a member of the *Mimosoideae* before."

"The measure suggested that you would be suited for a yew wand, but we've tried most of those in stock with little indication of success so I see no reason to expect to find a match there. We could try something made of elder next, the measure only very rarely suggests a wand of such wood but there have been a surprising number of matches with it when other wands fail." He paused, and Harry thought that his watery eyes twinkled for a moment. "Say, are you feeling especially daring?"

"Not really," Allie replied, but Ollivander had already darted behind of a shelf of wandboxes that was still, somehow, impossibly full.

"I wonder," Ollivander continued as he came out of a door wedged between two shelves on the right hand-wall that Harry was certain hadn't been there before. In his hands the wandmaker carried a small chest. He placed it on the counter and opened it, and a rack with a dozen wands popped up. "These wands are the work of my godfather, Drosselmeyer."

He paused and cleared his throat, "not that that was his actual name, of course. I called him that because he was my godfather, and was an absolute genius with automatons and clockworks and the like. He used to make the most fantastic toys, all without the aid of magic."

He likely inspired the story, but I digress. He was a wandmaker as well, if a rather eccentric one."

Coming from Ollivander Harry thought this was a bit rich, but he didn't say anything as the wandmaker opened the chest and a shelf popped up with little cubbyholes for wandboxes.

"He sent me these recently to evaluate and we just might find a match in here. Now let us see...this one won't do," he said, pulling out one box and setting it aside.

"Why?"

"Phoenix Feather in erumpet horn," Ollivander said. "He was trying to replace wood with ivory, but I fail to grasp his reasoning for using that horn. I can just see it, swirl—" he whipped his hand around as though holding a wand "—jab—" this a fencer's lunge, "—KABOOM!" he shouted.

He paused, took in Harry who was watching him intently, and cleared his throat. "As I was saying, it simply won't do." He turned back to the rack of cubbies and ran a finger along the markings. "Now let's see..." he plucked a wand off the rack. "Elder wood and phoenix feather."

Harry could see Allie start to object, but then she warily took the wand and gave it a slight wave.

The side of the shop disappeared in a flash of light and a wall-shattering KABOOM that picked Harry up and slammed him down into something hard, before burying him in wand boxes. Aside from his ears which were ringing nothing felt hurt, so Harry reached up and started to brush boxes away until his hand encountered something smooth and hard. He followed it, pushing boxes away until his hand broke the surface and he could gingerly stand up. He tried his best, but he was certain he'd crushed at least a dozen wand boxes.

Allie and Ollivander were both still standing. The former was untouched by the explosion, but Ollivander's hair stuck straight out, and the skin on his face was covered with dark soot.

"Intriguing," Ollivander said, carefully taking the wand back. "It is clearly a very temperamental wand, and it doesn't seem to like you much."

Harry looked over at the wall. There was a very precise, very large, seven-sided hole that people were poking their heads into to see what had happened.

Ollivander pulled out a long, thin wand and whipped it at the hole. The air around the hole shimmered briefly before forming a bright purple patch. "Let's see, petrified pine and unicorn tail hair, quite hard."

Allie took the wand and flicked it. Nothing happened.

"Hmm, no," Ollivander said. "Dear Godfather Drosselmeyer had such high hopes for it, but I fear the mineral nature of the wood, that is, the fact that the wood has been replaced by stone, makes it a thaum resistor."

"Perhaps mangrove and the hair of a mermaid—a native of tropical seas, mind you, not our cold, dark, freshwater lakes—purportedly excellent for underwater magic."

Allie had barely touched the wand before the shop began to fill rapidly with water. Only the fact that the patch leaked, Harry was sure, kept them from drowning until Mr. Ollivander was able to get rid of the water by the simply expedient of blasting away his front door.

"No, definitely not," Ollivander said, replacing the wand in the rack after drying Harry and Allie with a flick of his wand. He appeared content to drip on his sodden floor. He paused and considered his front door and Harry turned to look.

The top of a gate was evident near the top of the door frame, either it had been conjured before the door had been blasted, or it was on some kind of automatic release, as a large pile of wand boxes caught up in it hide the entrance from sight.

"Hmmm, I wonder..." Ollivander said. Harry turned back in time to see the wandmaker pluck a wand from the very bottom of the rack. "This one has possibilities. According to the letter he was left with a

wand-blank, a piece of prepared wood that is intended to become a wand, that was too short for the core. .

"He ended up taking the remains of a previously failed experiment—an attempt to keep dual wand cores from either separating apart or violently exploding, as would normally be the case, whenever two cores were used. He had the idea that using two woods was the answer."

"Was it?" Harry asked.

"You've heard of Tunguska, of course," Ollivander said.

"Who?" Harry asked.

"Or perhaps not," Ollivander said. "Hmm. It seems as though the obliviators were even more successful than I had hoped. It seemed impossible at the time to keep it from the muggles.

"Still, the experiment did give him some practical experience in joining wand-blanks together which would normally be little more than a curiosity piece, but in this case perhaps..." he offered it to Allie.

Allie took it with a grave trepidation, then slowly relaxed. "This one," she said softly as black and silver sparks danced out from the tip. "It's certainly better than the others."

Ollivander hopped and clapped excitedly. "Oh very well done. Dear Godfather Drosselmeyer will be so very happy. You see, he thought it was a failure for so very long. The wood of the shaft is cypress which is why I thought of it, and it has a mistletoe grip. Its oddly metric—twenty-seven centimeters long to be precise—and slightly unbalanced."

"Unbalanced?" Allie asked.

"It has a fwooper feather core," he said in warning, "and is a half-gram heavy on the tip end."

Allie frowned at him for a moment before nodding.

"If you have any problems, any at all, let me know," Ollivander said. "I would dearly love to hear how that wand works for you."

Allie paid for her wand, then Harry gave Ollivander seven galleons for his and the wandmaker bowed them out of his shop.

"What's a fwooper?" Harry asked.

"Some kind of bird, I think," Allie frowned, "its song is supposed to drive people mad. Or maybe it just enchants them into listening to it until they die of starvation or something."

"It feels right, though?" Harry asked as they wandered back up the alley towards the bookstore they'd passed by earlier. "I mean, when I touched mine it felt like I'd just jumped into a pool of warm water, only it wasn't wet, and it felt like I could do anything at all... Did you get that feeling, Allie?"

"Sort of," Allie fingered her wand distractedly. "It feels better than any of the other wands I tried."

Harry was about to inquire further, but she stopped suddenly, and pulled him into an apothecary.

"I suddenly realized I needed something," she told Harry as she bought a small sachet of dried herbs.

"What are those for?" Harry asked as they left the shop.

"I'll explain in a moment," Allie said. "If I remember there was a magical equipment shop between here and Flourish and Blotts."

"Magical equipment?"

"We got scales and the crystal phials earlier, but we still need telescopes," Allie pointed out.

"Oh," Harry said. "I thought that a magical equipment shop would have, well, magical equipment."

Allie gave him a puzzled look. "It is equipment that is clearly used for...wait, did you mean enchanted equipment? Thing that have magic in them like the Patil's dishes?"

"A little more exciting than magical dishes," Harry managed despite his face heating up.

"Oh, they have that too, of course," Allie told him. "In fact, I'm counting on it."

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The magical equipment shop did indeed have telescopes. Fat, squat reflector telescopes and long, skinny refractors. It had telescopes in brass, as well as silver, bronze, and electrum. There were telescopes that had detachable ends that you could put on a shelf or stick to a wall, and when you looked through the eye-piece you could see the room it was in; and telescopes that had tubes that could be bent for seeing around corners. There were telescopes for viewing things at night, and telescope for viewing things in daylight, and even telescopes that could see through clouds. There were telescopes with glass lenses for viewing stars, and telescopes with a variety of crystal lenses for viewing—actually, Harry wasn't sure what they were for viewing, only that the shop had them.

In addition to the telescopes (they each got one that was collapsible and made of brass) there were all the magical devices Harry could have thought of and more. Two entire sets of shelves, each taller than Hagrid, were devoted to silver spindly things that whirled or spun or emitted puffs of colored smoke. There were crystal spheres that contained miniatures of the entire solar system, but with a touch of a wand could show Saturn and the complex array of rings and a multitude of moons, or even just one moon in particular if that's what the viewer wished. There was a teapot that was enchanted to heat water put in it and didn't need tea-leafs or bags to produce tea (hot or iced) on request with a matching silver bowl that could produce sugar, an enchanted flying carpet was rolled in one corner (display purposes only, not to be sold or rode on penalty of persecution by the Ministry of Magic), and an array of magical oil lamps (NO RUBBING). A display case was filled with magical rings, ranging from simple bands of gold to one that seemed carved out of one large diamond, to another with a glittering rainbow-hued gem the size of a chicken egg.

Harry had just finished examining a display case filled with watches with anywhere from one to thirteen hands, but none of which seemed to actually tell time, when Allie bumped into him.

"See anything interesting?" she asked.

"Loads," he said. He gestured at the watches, "I just can't seem to figure out what any of them do." Harry turned to her, "what about you?"

"Oh I found what I was looking for," she said with a grin and displayed a small bundle of grayish fur.

"That's magical?" Harry asked skeptically. "It looks like something one of Mrs. Figg's cats dragged in."

"That's exactly what it is supposed to look like," Allie agreed happily. She pulled out the small bundle of herbs and after a moment of prodding, opened the bundle of fur to reveal a small pocket. "Do you remember the cat that was by the cauldron store when we came in?"

"No," Harry said, looking around.

"I meant when we entered the Alley," she said.

Harry shook his head.

"Well, it's been following us," she said as she filled the mouse with the herbs. "There are some spells, really, really advanced spells, that can allow a witch or wizard to possess a living animal. More likely though it is some witch or wizard's familiar with observation charms on it that has been sent out to trail us."

"You mean me," Harry said as Allie placed the last of the herbs inside the fur and sealed the pocket up.

Allie hesitated, but then nodded in agreement. "You."

"Okay, so how do we get rid of it?" Harry asked after a moment.

Allie grinned again, and this time there was something vaguely unsettling about it.

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Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Head of Gryffindor House, Transfiguration Professor, Double Transfiguration Mastery (Transmogrification and Conjuraton), and twice Highlighted Transfiguration Master in Transfiguration Today: September, 1969 (for transfiguring—on a drunken dare—a 600-acre dairy farm into a three-day, 32-act music concert with an audience of more than a half million muggles) and June, 1978 (for the switching spell that swapped fifty kilos of bog peat for a similar mass of lunar strata after having a tipples too many at the staff party that had started quite spontaneously at the realization that the Marauders were gone...and incidentally proved both that Alberic Wiffle was wrong and magic could be done outside of the boundaries of Earth's atmosphere, and also that the moon was decidedly not made out of green cheese) was not having a good day.

To be honest that not 'good day' had actually begun more than a month earlier when Albus Dumbledore had pounded on her door on one of the last days of term to tell her that she was in charge until he got back, before disappearing in a flash of phoenix fire. That had been followed by a puzzling conversation the next day when he informed her that he had delivered Harry's letter personally so he could be scratched off the list, and would she kindly make arrangements for two students (instead of the expected one) to start come the fall term. The revelation that the mystery student was the heir to, and arguably the head of, one of the oldest and (in certain circles) most prestigious (not to mention powerful) Pureblood families in England hadn't worried her. No, Minerva had some very fond memories of Charms Mistress Miranda Thorne (Deputy Headmistress, Head of Slytherin).

On the other hand, she was also the child—acknowledged or not (not, in this case)—of one He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's more notorious Death Eaters. She had argued long and hard against accepting those students whose parents had escaped imprisonment, though in the end she'd had little choice but to agree with Albus Dumbledore that providing them with a supportive environment might help them make wiser decisions than their parents.

And then there were her...abilities.

Accepting Remus Lupin had been dangerous enough, not just for him but the other students and the staff as well, but at least in that case measures could be taken. They hadn't been enough, of course. As intelligent as James, Remus, poor little Peter and...Black had been at grasping that being animagi would allow them to accompany their friend, they had been remarkably short-sighted when it came to first studying and then actually using that talent.

And the excuses they used! They honestly expected her to not see through 'a prank gone bad' when James Potter showed up in class with hart ears and one of the more impressive racks she had ever seen? And then there had been him with a bloody tail that he couldn't control. And Poor Peter with his, well, that was best not thought about.

Not that the Headmaster had stopped them when she had informed him. No, he had let them go on as they were. First with practicing and perfecting the transformation, and then letting them continue gallivanting across the Forbidden Forest and up and down the streets of Hogsmeade and made her sacrifice a full night's rest once a lunar cycle just to keep an eye on them. If only it had ended there and not with that utterly disgraceful incident with Severus. Taking points was all well and good, but giving them (and more) back to James—not that he hadn't deserved them—in front of the boy like that, and then threatening him? Utterly disgraceful, felt ashamed to call herself a Gryffindor. Not a lot that could be done without ruining things for Remus who was really as much a victim as Severus had been, but still.

And then there had been that vampire...just the memory of those years—thankfully well-passed—were enough to make her start shedding.

But neither of those compared to this. Still, Albus had said that precautions would be taken and she fully intended on learning what all of those precautions were, and then adding a few of her own. More than a few if the girl ended up in Gryffindor.

Unfortunately one of those 'precautions' had involved her spending the day in Diagon Alley as a cat following Harry Potter and his...friend. A part of her fully approved of his standing up for someone, especially if she had gotten him away from those muggles who she desperately hoped weren't as bad as she had feared but

somehow doubted it. Another part of her, the part that Pomona liked to call her 'inner lioness', wanted to jump at the girl, hissing and spitting and drive her away from Harry.

Minerva resisted the urge. She was, after all, not supposed to be seen and her markings were rather distinct. If she made too much of a commotion she'd be noticed and it was possible that Harry or friend might connect their new Transfiguration Professor with the cat that had followed them around Diagon Alley. Still, it was nice to get out on four feet sometimes and stretch. She hadn't had a chance to really be out and about as a cat in a good long while.

Which brought her back to why she wasn't having a good day.

So far she'd been chased by a dog (suddenly transforming from a cat into a witch was a noticeable occurrence even in the wizarding world and thus contradictory to not being noticed), dive-bombed by a small parliament of owls, avoided a falling stack of cauldrons, had her tail trodded on at least three times, been accidentally kicked twice, had been 'rescued' by one very young witch as a 'delightful stray' and only barely managed to get away without revealing herself (though she made it a point to remember said witch for when they'd meet again in a few years), and had been mobbed by an even younger boy with hands sticky from one of Florean Fortescue's Fabulous Fountain Freezies.

She was miserable, tired, and dirty; her fur stuck in clumps from the Freezie, and she hadn't had such a miserable time in her animagus form since James Potter was in school. Worse, for all her misery, she had very little that she could report to Dumbledore. The muggles apparently hadn't told him anything if some of what they had said was anything to go by, and the expected light show inside of Ollivanders was more spectacular than usual (not to mention wet, one of the few things she really despised as a cat was wet fur and it had unfortunately happened before the boy with the Fountain Freezie so she hadn't even gotten clean fur out of the deal and that blasted girl's mother had dried her too so she had been all nice and fluffy when the boy had attacked her). Hagrid would have to be cautioned, again, about letting slip information that he shouldn't, and Severus, miracle of miracles, had actually been polite. More polite to a student than she had ever seen before. Either his vacation had been passing extraordinarily well, or he was deathly ill.

Perhaps both.

In which case she might need to see to advertising for a new Potion Professor as well as Defense Against the Dark Arts one—one had to be prepared for next year, after all. Thankfully she already had the next advert for the later already written. It was identical to the one she'd posted the year before, only with the date changed.

As she contemplated her colleague's health (or potential lack thereof), the door of the magical equipment shop the pair had elected to stop at opened and Harry walked out. Minerva waited, expecting the girl to follow after him, but instead the door swung closed and Harry started walking up the Alley towards Flourish and Blotts. She hesitated, every instinct telling her that the girl was the one she had to watch out for. That Harry was too new to magic, still caught up in the awe and wonder of it to fully realize its implications. But Albus' orders had been precise and with a huff she set out after him.

A flash of gray out of the corner of her eye caught her attention and Minerva McGonagall sprang at the mouse that had suddenly appeared before her. She started to let it go, then the scent hit her.

Purrrr

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Allie grinned as the tabby cat with the odd, spectacle-like markings around its eyes caught the animated toy mouse. It resumed its normal appearance of a fluffy ball of gray fur as the cat batted it around for a moment. Then it transformed into a mouse again and took off, the cat right after it.

Whistling a jaunty tune she took off after Harry.

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Harry started when Allie tapped him on the shoulder, but grinned when he saw Allie smiling. "It worked?"

"Oh yeah," she said. "Any Rodent—Animated! Guaranteed fun and excitement for any cat, kneezle, krup, or owl. Will provide hours of enjoyment...yadda, yadda, so on and so forth."

"Neat," Harry said. "What was that that you put inside of it?"

"Magical catmint," Allie said, grinning wildly. "It almost makes me hope that someone really was possessing that cat. It's entirely harmless, mind you, at least to felines, but I've heard that the hallucinations and euphoria are quite spectacular."

"Makes me wish I could have seen it," Harry said.

"That's why I also got an Insta!Graph," Allie said, pulling out a copper picture frame. "Capture one memory for a lifetime of viewing enjoyment, anytime, anywhere."

Harry took the frame. Lying on its back on Diagon Alley's cobblestones was the cat. Its tail flicked back and forth wildly as it pawed at the ball of fluff clamped firmly in its jaws. The cat's ears were folded back, its eyes were wide, and it had a silly expression on its face as it rolled around. "Wow," he said, staring at it, then grinned up at Allie. "I think I'm going to like magic."

He handed her the frame back and was about to say more when a rather large, and very white, owl swept down on them. Harry ducked as the owl swept by so close it ruffled his hair. Immediately it banked around again, and this time Allie stuck out her arm.

The owl landed on it, gave Harry a disgusted look, and held out one taloned leg imperiously. He noted that there seemed to be something tied around the leg, but most of his attention was on the sharp talons and the curved beak.

"Well?" Allie asked.

"Well what?"

"Aren't you going to see what it has to say?"

Harry looked at the leg doubtfully. "You think it'll let me?"

"Yes," Allie said succinctly. "Wizards use owls to deliver their post, remember?"

Harry nodded, then carefully tugged at the twine holding the roll of parchment to the owl's leg until it came loose. He backed out of range quickly as soon as he had the parchment, and the owl seemed to roll its eyes and sigh.

"Uh," Harry looked down at the coarse handwriting on the note. "Harry Potter, sorry we weren't able to talk longer, um... Something about a birthday present, looking forward to seeing me on the first, Hagrid." He frowned, "Birthday present?"

"Yeah, you know, gifts commonly given to commemorate the day you were born?" Allie asked.

"I know what they are, I just never got any before," Harry muttered as a small cage rolled out of the parchment into his hand. "Huh, a cage. A really small cage."

The owl glared at him.

"I think he meant the owl," Allie said.

The owl nodded its entire body up and down.

"Is that right?" Harry asked, he looked at the owl, "Are you my birthday present?"

Again that whole body bob.

"Uh...do you have a name?" Harry asked. "And how do you fit in this cage?"

The owl rolled its eyes again and looked plaintively at Allie.

"I would think," Allie said dryly. "That the cage has been shrunk, and needs to be unshrunk for her to fit in. And you need to give her a name."

"Her?" Harry asked.

Allie nodded firmly.

"How do you know?" he asked. "Why couldn't it be a boy owl?"

"Because I'm a—" she paused, and then shrugged. "It's a girl thing, Harry. Trust me, you are better off not knowing...ever."

"Oh," Harry said, wondering just what it was she had been about to say.

"Owl," Allie said, turning from Harry to the snowy owl perched on her arm. "Harry will be staying with the Patils until school starts."

The owl bobbed once more and took off. It circled once above them, then headed east.

"Hagrid shouldn't have done that," Harry said.

Allie frowned, "Why not?"

"I mean, he didn't have to," Harry said, feeling rather foolish. "I barely met him. Why would he do something like get me an owl?"

"Because he wanted to," Allie suggested. "Hagrid is very...generous with his feelings. He also knows more about dangerous animals than any three other people I've met. He also likes animals even more than he knows about him. I haven't asked, but I'm fairly certain that Eyelops has a ban on him coming in except on business."

"So it was a way for him to get closer to some animals?" Harry asked distastefully. "First I'm famous, and now people want to use that fame."

"Probably, but not Hagrid," Allie said.

Harry looked at her skeptically, "You just told me he couldn't go in that place with the owls unless he was there to buy something."

"First off, Hagrid is in charge of the grounds and school animals," Allie said. "There are probably a hundred good reasons for being there other than to buy you an owl."

"Second, there are going to be at least three types of people who are going to want to be your friend. Type one are those at the pub, the fans who mostly possess the brains of a herd of sheep. Type two are those that want something from you, whether it's a favor, or advancing themselves by being near you, or simply sharing your

fame. Type three are those who could care less and just think that Harry Potter might be a fun or interesting person to be around.

"Hagrid is too down to earth to be part of number one, and he isn't cunning enough for number two."

"Which leaves three," Harry said, nodding. "Which are you?" he asked curiously.

"Two and three," Allie said without missing a beat. "I never said they couldn't be more than one type."

Harry felt his stomach turn into a rock. He'd thought Allie was his friend, even stood up to the headmaster of his new school, his chance to escape the Dursleys and the greatest wizard alive (if Padma was right). But even she wanted something from him.

"What do you want from me?" he asked, pulling away. A sudden thought came to him, "If this is about money—"

Allie laughed.

Harry had been prepared for shock, evasion, even outright denial. "What's so funny?" he asked confused.

"The Thorne family is loaded," Allie said. "I just can't touch most of it for another couple of years." She shook her head, "Believe me, Harry, the last thing I'm after is your inheritance."

"But you just said you wanted something from me," Harry protested.

"And I do," Allie said, "In addition to your friendship, of course."

"Of course," Harry said flatly as he crossed his arms. The surprise of her sudden revelation had passed and now it just hurt. It wasn't the physical kind of hurt that came at the end of one of Dudley's 'Harry Hunting' games, but something deeper. He didn't know how to react to it, and it left him feeling confused and angry.

"When you stood up to Dumbledore for me and got him to agree to let me go to Howarts, which I'm grateful for, by the way, and I fully intend to repay the favor—"

Harry managed a tight nod in acknowledgement, not trusting himself to speak.

"—it dragged me into the magical community in a way that I wasn't before," Allie said. "That means it's a matter of when, not if, my gift will be revealed openly. I think I might have mentioned how bad its rep is? Well it's even more dangerous than its rep suggests."

"Which you told Mr. Patil," Harry said flatly.

"He already knew," Allie said. "He and Mum went to school together, they were really close which is why I lived with the Patils after she...wasn't able to care for me any more," she concluded somewhat lamely. He found out on one those take-your-kids-to-work day things. I ended up saving his life."

"But you don't live there anymore."

Allie glared at him and Harry found that he didn't care. He just looked at her defiantly.

"You really want to do this?"

"I want the truth," Harry said. "Seems like I haven't been getting a whole lot of it."

"Fine," she said shortly. "Do you mind if we take this off the main street?"

"Sure."

She led him over to an alleyway between two shops.

"So?" Harry asked when they were alone.

"So I saved Chirag's life, but I was probably about five seconds away from killing Padma before he stopped me," Allie said shortly.

Harry flinched.

"What, do you think it was all light and cheerful and he helped me out of the kindness of his heart?" Allie asked. "I told that comparing me to the Pied Piper wasn't far off. The Piper kills all the kids at the

end of the story. Did you somehow think I only got the neat parts and didn't get the bad ones too?"

"I didn't know what to think," Harry protested. "Besides, it's not like I actually know anything because you don't want to tell me."

Allie wouldn't meet his eyes, but did nod grudgingly. "Fair enough."

"So," Harry said, and finding himself suddenly at a loss for what to say next, asked: "so what do you want from me?"

Allie looked up at him, and Harry had the uncomfortable feeling that she was searching him for an answer he couldn't have given, and if he had it was a question that she didn't know how to ask.

"What I am won't stay secret forever, it can't," she said finally. "I'm hoping that having Harry Potter as a friend will help convince people that I'm not the next dark lord when my secrets come out."

"Okay," Harry said, it made sense...wait, no it didn't. "I don't think you'll have that problem though, Allie," he said with a slight grin.

"Oh?" Allie asked.

Harry nodded, feeling rather clever, "Anyone with eyes can see that you're too pretty to be a dark lord."

Allie made a noise of outrage as Harry took off running up Diagon Alley towards the refuge of the bookstore.

As he ran a stray thought past through his mind.

Hey, this Tag game that Dudders likes so much can be fun!

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Flourish and Blotts was everything Harry ever imagined a bookstore to be and more; deep and still, with the dusty, musty odor of paper, parchment, and leather bindings. Tall shelves that stretched to the ceiling lined the walls and were filled with row upon row of books. A magnificent brass ladder swung around the wall shelves and provided a perch to look down on the rows upon rows of shorter shelves—which were still as tall as Hagrid if not more—that filled the

rest of the store. One set was actually a rack of diamond-shaped holes that were filled with scrolls ranging from simple parchment to an elaborate one made of silver. Tables, wood dark and heavy with age and worn silk-smooth by hundreds of years and thousands of hands, stood in corners and at ends of aisles with still more books displayed.

He'd never had a book of his very own before, but he'd recognized that reading was a type of power that the Dursleys couldn't take away from him. He'd read every book in his primary school's small library; even read some of the books at the Little Whinging library when his entire class had been trekked over to get their library cards. Harry had been careful to never bring anything back to Number 4, of course. Dudley wouldn't care that it was a library book, only that Harry had something and that he could hurt Harry by ruining it and Uncle Vernon would of course side with Dudley. That hadn't stopped him from very carefully reading all of the books on the shelf in Dudley's second bedroom where they'd sat, never read, until Harry had snuck in and opened them.

Harry quickly found his school books and then took the time to look around. There were big books and small books, books in English and books in other languages, books with clever little symbols and books with nothing written in them at all. There were books on potions, on transfiguration, on charms, on illusions. There were books on how to predict the future and how to see the past.

He would have been content to stay and just brose through books for hours, but Allie reminded him that they were to meet with the twins. He reluctantly turned from the shelves to find another problem, what to do with the stack of books that he'd pulled off of shelves, thinking that he'd find them interesting.

"Finding everything okay?" A wizard in sharp robes with the name of the shop across the chest, asked.

"Too well," Harry sighed, looking at the small mountain (it nearly reached his chin) that he had gathered. "That's the problem."

"Ah," the wizards said. "Well, I'll just be levitating these back to th—"

"Wait," Harry said sharply. He reached into the stack and pulled a copy of the Sorcerer's Almanac out of it. After a moment of thought,

a paving-stone sized book that was thicker than the width of his spread hand entitled An Extremely Brief History of Magic joined it.

"That everything?" the wizard asked with an amused look.

Harry looked at the pile, then at his course books and the two books he'd chosen, and sighed. Decisions, decisions. "I'll take, uh, Francis Barrett's editing of John Dee's Encyclopedia Magica as well, please."

"The whole thing?" the wizard asked.

Harry nodded.

The wizard wagged his wand, and the remaining books hopped up and began ambling back to their shelves. "A good choice, Dee. Not as much detail as some, but very comprehensive; and Magus Barrett's annotating is superb, if Dee doesn't give you enough detail Barrett gives you good starting places to find it."

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Harry groaned and leaned back into the couch in the living room. The third piece of cake, he thought, was probably too much. It had taken him almost two weeks to get over a surprising habit of picking at meals, though given how much he normal got to eat it really shouldn't have been. He'd replaced it with a habit of trying to match the twins at every meal, a habit that often left him feeling unwell afterwards. He'd been trying to find a comfortable point somewhere in between, and was privately grateful that neither of the elder Patils had said anything though he was sure that they'd noticed. He was equally sure that the twins had not, Padma had a tendency to start asking questions the moment she didn't understand something, and once Parvati started talking it seemed the only way to make her stop was to suggest that it might be time for a snack.

The cake had been worth it though. A giant three-tier cake that when you sliced it was any kind of cake you could name.

"That was excellent, Mrs. Patil," he said.

"I'm glad you liked it," she replied. "I usually don't like using magic for food, but I thought your first real birthday cake should be special."

Harry nodded his understanding. Once she'd found out that cooking was one of the few activities he'd enjoyed doing at the Dursleys (the few times his Aunt Petunia would actually leave him alone to cook, at least) she'd taken to encouraging his talent. Padma and Parvati both disliked cooking at the best of times, and since their mother expressly forbade any magic near her kitchen they were glad to give up helping her in favor of Harry.

Harry closed his eyes and let the couch enfold him, wondering if this was what it was like to have a family. He was rudely jolted out of his reverie by something heavy being dropped into his lap. He looked up to find both twins staring down at him.

"You can't fall asleep yet," Parvati said accusingly.

"What is this?" Harry asked, staring at the very large package in his lap wrapped with bright yellow paper covered with pink and purple elephants that danced across it as he watched.

"It's a birthday present," Padma stated.

"You have to open it," Parvati explained. "That one's from Padma."

"I get presents?" Harry asked with wide eyes.

"It's been known to happen," Mr. Patil teased.

Harry turned from him to Allie who was smirking at him from where she leaned against one wall.

"Go ahead and open it before they strain something," she said with a nod towards Parvati who turned and stuck a tongue out at the other girl.

Harry found a seam in the paper and ripped it back. A flash went off somewhere to his left and he looked up guiltily to find Mr. Patil smiling at him as he lowered a large camera.

"Harry's first birthday present," he said proudly, passing around the photo which quickly found itself in its own frame next to a dozen others that had labels like 'Harry's Hogwarts Letter', 'Harry's first robes', 'Harry's new wand', and 'Harry's first birthday cake'.

"Be careful," Padma whispered with a straight face.

"They might start an album," her sister added. Both shuddered.

"We aren't that bad," Mr. Patil said.

The twins gave him a look that clearly said that they thought otherwise.

"Go ahead and finish opening your present," Mrs. Patil said, giving the twins and her husband a look of long-suffering patience.

Harry ripped the rest of the paper off the top to reveal a large book with a dark red leather cover that was half-covered with gold embossed scroll-work. "Complete Collected Codices Merlinus," he read. "Wow."

"It's Grandmaster Asimov's annotation," Padma said proudly.

"You got him Asimov's annotating of the Merlin Codices?" Allie looked at her askance.

"Daddy said we could get him whatever we wanted," Padma said.

Allie shook her head.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"Your girlfriend has an eye for books," Allie said.

"She's not his girlfriend," Parvati said.

"I'm not?" her sister asked affronted.

"No, I am," Parvati said.

"You, ah, what?" Harry managed.

"Don't worry about it, just do as I say and everything will be fine," Parvati advised him.

Allie snickered.

Padma shook her head, "You can't be his girlfriend."

"Why not?" Parvati demanded.

"Because I was born first," Padma said promptly. "I get first call."

Parvati glared at her sister, then looked at Harry appraisingly before turning back to Padma. "Share?"

"Help?" Harry's plea came out in almost a squeak from where he was trapped in the soft couch between the twins with the heavy book on his lap.

"Girls," Mr. Patil said as Allie burst out laughing.

"Daddy said we couldn't start dating until we're thirteen," Padma said.

"You have some time to get comfortable with the idea," her sister added.

"Allie, help me?" Harry asked.

"No way," Allie replied. "Over-fed, under-bred, cretins are one thing, the twins are something else."

The twins turned and this time both stuck their tongues out at her.

Harry laughed. From the grins the twins exchanged that had been at least part of their goal, but he didn't care. At the Dursleys there'd been precious few things for him to laugh about, and even then he didn't dare let them catch him actually laughing.

"Parvati's turn," Padma said as her sister produced a box that was just as brightly wrapped, though not as neatly as her own had been.

He ripped the paper off without hesitating this time. Parvati's present was a daily calendar on a fancy wood base that was carved with

strange symbols. A small pad of paper was set next to the stack of calendar days, and came with an equally small quill and pot of ink.

"It's a horoscope-a-day calendar," Parvati said. "Each day has its own horoscope just for you. You can write important notes on the parchment and they'll copy themselves onto the proper day, and there's a charm on it that will wake you up at the time you specify."

"Wow," Harry said.

"Very nice," Padma agreed sardonically.

Parvati crossed her arms, "Well at least I got him something useful. I mean, who's even read the Merlin codexes?"

"Codices," Padma and Allie said together.

"They're long, dry, boring, written in really awful handwriting, and aren't even written in English!"

"Is too English!"

"Is not!"

"It's old English, Parvati," Allie said.

"It's okay, Harry," Padma told him as Allie and Parvati argued over whether or not Old English was really English at all. "I got you a copy that used typeset with modern spelling and translation."

"Thank you," Harry said.

"My turn next, I suppose," Allie said, flipping a package to Harry.

Harry caught it deftly and looked down. There was a small, flat box that was tied to a somewhat larger box. Neither were wrapped with paper, and the smaller box was the same kind of box that his Uncle had brought his Aunt jewelry in. "What is this?" he asked.

"It's a birthday present," Allie said.

"No, I mean...this is a jewelry box," Harry said.

"Yeah, well," Allie shrugged uncomfortably. "Just open it, will you?"

Harry hesitated, then flipped the lid open. Nestled on a velvet backing was a bird carved from amber. Its wings were upraised, and gold flames rose around it. Its eyes were chips of some green stone, and it held a black orb in its claws. The whole thing was not even an inch high, and it hung from a silver necklace.

"It's, um..."

"It's a phoenix," Padma said. She started to reach down to pick it up.

"Stop!"

Padma froze and looked at Allie in surprise.

"You won't want anyone touching that for a month or so," Allie told Harry.

"Why not?" Harry asked.

"Protection spells," Allie said flatly. "It's a charm, although technically I suppose it's an amulet or talisman, I'm not sure which. The enchantments run off your aura so you need to wear it close to your skin, and it'll only work if you're wearing it. Probably best that you don't go flashing it around or people'll realize that you have it."

"What kind of spells?" Harry asked.

"As I said, protective ones," Allie said. "It'll grow warm if you're in danger. The hotter it gets the more danger. If you pull it out it'll glow in dark places. There are some basic anchored protective runes, nothing spectacular, mind, there's a limit on what I can do on a piece that small and mobile. What anyone can do, really, since wards are meant to be anchored to one place.

"I didn't have any way of testing it, but I'll tell you right now it won't stop any high-level curses, not that we should be seeing any of those any time soon."

She hesitated, "I, uh, experimented with my magic null-zone wards. It'll need at least a year and a day to charge and it probably won't

work, but if you break the obsidian orb off of it a temporary anti-magic field will pop up centered on the orb."

"How big a field and for how long?" Chirag asked sharply

Allie shrugged. "I ripped most of the arithmancy calculations from a temporary zonal protection sphere. The zone will be spherical and centered on the orb. The size should be proportional to the wearer's magical strength, but not to the length of time worn. I'm not sure on how big an area it'll cover, but it'll probably be somewhere between six and thirty feet, so at best a sphere sixty feet wide, but probably thirty or so. Duration could be anywhere from seven to seven times seven times seven seconds, but probably forty-nine seconds."

"What type of zonal ward?" Ms. Patil interjected.

Allie looked at her, "pardon?"

"What type of protection sphere did you modify?" she repeated.

"Er, one to protect against dogs," Allie said. "But that's not important. It—"

"You took the arithmancy calculations from a mail-carrier's charm?" Mr. Patil asked.

"Enchantment, actually," Allie said. "Just for interfacing and the rune controller-sequence, oh, and power regulation, but that's really governed by the field regulator of the anti-magic ward."

"Which means what, exactly?" Harry asked quietly as he watched the two adults and Allie.

"That she isn't sure," Padma said.

"Isn't sure of what?"

"If it'll work, now hush."

Mr. Patil was pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers, "How are you storing the power for all of this?"

"The primary set of enchantments all use a direct-flow pattern through a first-order power sink," Allie said. "The anti-magic field uses, uh, a," she muttered something that Harry didn't catch as her cheeks turned pink.

"Allie," Mr. Patil growled.

"A single-release fourth-order power matrix embedded in the orb," Allie muttered a little louder.

"Oh wait! I know this," Parvati said. "That means it'll blow up, right?"

"No," Allie said. "It means that it'll store power, and when the ward is activated it'll power the ward...once."

"And then it'll blow up," Parvati said.

"Unless the matrix holding it breaks first," Padma said. "Then the whole thing will just blow up instead of working."

"Not all of my wards blow up when they fail," Allie said.

"Tree house," Parvati said.

"That was that insane squirrel's fault!" Allie protested.

"And the new containment ring in my lab?" Mrs. Patil asked with a smile.

Allie crossed her arms. "Wasn't my fault. That lab mouse of yours, the one with the over-sized head, tipped over a bottle of a thaum indicator solution that wiped out part of a rune-sequence. I got the anti-gnome wards on the garden right, didn't I?"

"You got me a present that might blow me up?" Harry asked Allie.

"I did not get you a present that will—" Allie stopped and sighed. "Fine. It's not my power matrix. I had Master G do it for me. It's perfectly safe."

Mr. Patil frowned, "Perhaps you should show it to Professor Dumbledore, Harry, just to make sure."

Harry looked at the amulet again, then up at Allie. "If it's okay with you—"

"Go ahead," she said with a shake of her head. "My personal issues aside, he really is one of the smartest wizards alive."

"Okay," Harry said, he took the phoenix out of the box and fastened the necklace around his neck. "Plus it looks really neat," he said, looking down at the carved phoenix.

"Pretty," Padma agreed.

Parvati nodded, "It'd be a shame to hide it."

"I needed a shape and materials that would take the charms," Allie said, "There weren't exactly a lot of things to choose from. It takes more than what I can do to make a charm stick to most metals. It's meant to be worn against the skin, where it'll take a magical scan to reveal that it's enchanted. Wear it openly and anyone who knows what a magical amulet looks like will be able to identify it as one, and it won't charge as fast or be as effective."

Harry stopped and considered that. "You think it's likely that I'm going to be attacked?"

Allie and the elder Patils traded looks. Finally Allie shrugged. "I don't know anything for certain, Harry. Not all of Lord Vo—"

"Allie!" Mr. Patil said sharply.

"Fine, not all of His followers were sent to prison," Allie said. "A lot of them bribed or threatened their way out and still walk free. All of them have a reason to really not like you. Some of them may seek to harm or kill you, either for revenge or because they think that's what their Master would want. Just remember, there isn't going to be enough power for the anti-magic field until August 1st of next year."

Harry hesitated, then reluctantly tucked it inside his shirt. The amulet was gently warm against his skin. He picked up the flat box and started to close it, when he noticed a scrap of parchment inside of it. Curious he plucked it out and unrolled it until he could read what was scrawled on it, and stumbled through: "Hic facet Arthurus, Rex Quondam, Rexque futurus."

The wooden box that was the other half of his present disappeared and was replaced with a small hardcover book with a pale yellow-cream cover. Harry picked it up, "The Once and Future King?" he asked, flipping it over, "The magical epic of King Arthur and his shining Camelot."

"It's a safe," Allie said. "It's a book, real enough, but if you say that phrase it turns into a box that you can store things in and back."

"It's just the kind of book the Dursleys would loath," Harry said with a broad grin. "Thank you." He picked up the parchment again and this time the Latin phrase came easier and he was left holding a wooden box a little larger than the book had been with a simple clasp. "Um, the password..."

"It's what's written on Arthur's gravestone," Parvati said, instantly recognizing the quote.

"Here lies Arthur, the Once and Future King," Padma added.

Harry dropped the jewelry box inside of the wooden box and sealed it again before speaking the password a third time.

"In that case," Mr. Patil said looking at his wife. "I believe it is now our turn..."

Chapter Five: Magic Trains

One thing about trains: it doesn't matter where they're going. What matters is deciding to get on.

The Polar Express (Film)

One month prior:

Albus Dumbledore carefully selected a lemon drop from the crystal bowl he normally kept on his office desk. After examining it he opened his mouth, carefully placed it on his tongue, and closed his eyes as the first sour bite flooded his mouth. Opening them again he made a lifting gesture with one hand, the crystal bowl lifting obediently into the air and proffering itself to the woman standing before his desk. "Lemon drop?"

The look his Deputy Headmistress gave him was sourer than the lemon drop slowly dissolving on his tongue.

"No then," he said, gesturing the crystal bowl back to his desk. "How did your observations of the young Mister Potter go?"

The look on Minerva McGonagall's face grew even sourer and a nervous tic appeared beneath her left eye. That was disturbing. Even in the very darkest years before Tom's demise—how ever brief he was sure it would eventually prove to be—that tic hadn't been there. In fact, Albus Dumbledore, Supreme Mugwump, ad nauseum couldn't recall seeing that tic at all since James Potter and his cohorts had left school...or, for that matter, before they had started.

"I haven't had such a miserable time as a cat since James Potter and Black—" she spat the name like it was a foul word—"graduated. I was kicked, my trail was trodden on, one very young boy with very sticky hands from one of Florean Fortescue's Fabulous Fountain Freezies got my fur all sticky..."

"You were successful then?" Albus asked.

Minerva pursed her lips. "Somewhat. I couldn't follow them into the shops or Gringotts of course."

"Of course," Albus agreed. "And?"

"The magic flares inside Ollivander's were stronger than usual."

"Oh? In what way?"

Minerva gritted her teeth, "at least one of them flooded the shop. Ollivander blasted his door open. Many people were...upset by the tide of water that came out."

"You got wet, I take it?"

"Yes," she said tersely.

"Mmm-hmm," he said, savoring the last of the lemon drop before helping himself to another. "And what did they talk about?"

"Very little, really. Harry asked about Quidditch, but Ms...Blackthorn, I think you called her? Well," Minerva huffed, "she apparently doesn't follow the game. Prefers rugby of all things. They ran into Hagrid coming out of Gringotts and he blathered all about you having him retrieve the you-know-what from a high-security vault. He managed not to tell them what it was, but he spouted off practically everything else."

"Expected, but not terribly troubling," Albus said. "It isn't exactly the sort of information that anyone can make use of, Minerva, and you know as well as I that Hagrid is more than what he seems to first eye. He retrieved the item in question as expected. If people know that it is in the safety and security of Hogwarts..." he gave a little shrug.

"Hmph," Minerva huffed. "I do hope you are correct about this, Albus. That object, there are people who would do anything, even try the Walls of Hogwarts, for it. We will have students here. You are running a grave risk with their safety, a risk that I am not at all comfortable with."

"Precautions have been taken, Minerva, trust me," Albus said soothingly. "You know very well that if I thought that there was any real danger to the students I would have never allowed it to be brought here. Now, what else did Harry and...his friend discuss?"

Minerva frowned. "I gathered from what they said that the Dursleys told him nothing at all about the wizarding world."

"Disappointing, yes," Albus agreed. "However it might turn out for the best. How did he take to people recognizing who he was?"

"Mostly I don't think they did, not right away," the Transfiguration Professor said. "It was apparent that all parties, including the Patils, were trying to keep their visit low-key."

"Which suggests that he was at least warned about other peoples' reactions and took measures to avoid a situation he was uncomfortable with," the Headmaster pointed out.

"Please, Albus, he's an eleven year old boy, no matter what he did when he was little more than an infant or who his parents were," Minerva said faintly. "More likely the Patils or Ms. Blackthorn had arranged things, that girl is pure Slytherin material, believe me. It's in the blood."

"Please, Minerva," Albus said. "I never took you to be one to fall into that kind of thinking. After all, Rookwood was a Ravenclaw way back when, and Lord Voldemort's most useful spy, the one that they say was his most trusted servant, was a Gryffindor."

"So they say," she repeated, her voice dripping contempt. "In that one's case, however, the acorn does not fall far from the oak tree."

"Very well," Albus said. "Did anything else happen?"

"They did meet Severus," Minerva said musingly. "He was...polite, actually. It's probably best that you don't inform Sybill. No doubt it's a sign that the rivers are going to turn into butterbeer or the Earth is going to be a rain of fluffy white mini-lops named Bun bun or some such."

Albus' lips twitched. "Ah Severus. I had worried, Minerva. Given how antagonistic young Harry Potter's father was to him I'd almost convinced myself that having both of them in the castle, no matter how big Hogwarts is, would be a disaster waiting to happen. I'm quite relieved to hear that my concerns were ill-warranted."

Minerva McGonagall's face slipped into a polite, if blank, mask that did little to hide from Albus just what she thought about her youngest colleague. While it was true that Severus Snape was the youngest

(by seven hours and nineteen minutes) person to ever receive an accredited Potion Mastery from the Potioneers International Guild, he also was (at least in her opinion) a poor teacher. True enough those students who entered his N.E.W.T.-level course had consistently ranked among the highest standing academically in the world (as befitted those graduating from Hogwarts) he also accepted far fewer into that course than any other Potion Master in Hogwarts' history. He was opinionated, sarcastic, short-tempered, possessed little patience, and blatantly favored his own House over any other. In fact, as Deputy Headmistress, she had a file cabinet with an ever-expansion charm on it just for complaints regarding one Severus Snape, ranging from un-fair detentions, to verbal abuse, to abusing and manipulating the house point system, and even ignoring the wrong-doing of Slytherin students—some of which had resulted in moderate harm (mostly from improperly cast jinxes). Only the fact that he had not personally harmed a student or had allowed a student to come to harm due to overt negligence had kept her from dropping copies of the contents of the file cabinet on the desks of the Board of Governors, the Minister for Magic, and the Editor of the Daily Prophet.

Which of course one Albus Dumbledore knew, just like she knew that he knew, and, for that matter knew that he knew she knew he knew.

"And how did the rest of the trip go? Did he get anything interesting from Flourish and Blotts?" he asked.

"I couldn't say, Headmaster," she said stiffly, dropping a tattered ball of grayish fluff on his desk. "Someone dropped this on the street as I followed Harry from the store where he bought his telescope."

Albus Dumbledore frowned as he picked it up and, after a moment of poking, managed to open the magically concealed pocket to reveal the badly masticated remnants of the herbs inside.

"Oh my," he said, fighting a grin that threatened to break out across his face.

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Now:

"Relax, Harry, she'll be here."

Harry looked up at Mr. Patil. "You think so? I mean, I haven't seen her since Diagon Alley. She hasn't even written." He reached down to stroke Hedwig through the wire mesh of the cage. As Allie had said, it had only taken a tap of Mr. Patil's wand to unshrink it, at which point the white owl he'd first met at Diagon Alley had swept in and promptly made itself at home. Picking out a name for her had taken three weeks and half of the Encyclopedia Magica.

Mr. Patil looked pensive. "Allie is a fine young woman, Harry. Very gifted magically; a shame that she has not been allowed formal schooling before now. But she has a habit of immersing herself in her work. Lack of communication is not, unfortunately, unusual."

"Oh," Harry said, looking down. "So what exactly does she do? You talked about her starting fires unintentionally with her magic, pyra-something, I think. She referred to herself as 'sort of like the pied-piper' and implied it had to do with magical pest removal. But I don't see how one has to do with the other, and why would getting rid of pixies and doxies be seen as a dangerous magical ability?"

Mr. Patil contemplated his answer for a moment. "I think I shall let her tell you that. Now, you should find a compartment and get settled in before the train leaves."

Harry nodded, accepting that he wasn't going to get anything more from the man who'd taken him in over the past few months. It was a mystery he was just going to have to work out for himself. Maybe he could talk her into some kind of guessing game? He put the thought aside and nodded politely. "Thank you, Mr. Patil, for the summer. It was wonderful."

Mr. Patil laughed. "And it was enjoyable for us as well. Take care, and don't forget to write."

"I won't," Harry promised.

He and the twins boarded the train and found the last compartment of the last car to be empty. They dragged their trunks inside, then Padma and Parvati went off to search for trouble or their friends.

Quite possibly both.

A boy not much older than hair with red hair stumbled into the compartment soon after. His trunk hit the floor with a loud thump as it fell from his fingers. "Is this compartment taken?"

"We've got room, if that's what you mean," Harry said.

"Ron Weasley," the boy said. "They say Harry Potter's on the train, have you seen him?"

"Every time I look in the mirror," Harry muttered.

Ron frowned, "You're him? You're Harry Potter?" he not-quite shouted.

"Mind keeping it down?" Harry asked. "If I had wanted everyone to know I'd have taken out an advert in the Daily Prophet."

"I, but, you're famous," Ron turned his shout into a loud whisper that was non-too-quiet (but at least wasn't a shout) at the last moment. "You killed You-Know-Who!"

Harry sighed, "So they tell me."

"Do you—"

"Remember anything?" Harry asked testily. "I was fifteen months old, Ron. Of course I don't remember anything!"

Ron flushed, "Sorry. I suppose you get that a lot."

Harry frowned, "Not as much as you'd imagine. I expect that's going to change soon...unfortunately."

Ron frowned, "What do you mean?" he asked as the train lurched. There was a piercing whistle and a blast of steam and the train began to slowly move.

Harry looked out at the platform inching away from them. He turned back to Ron and regarded him levelly, then shrugged. "It's..." he hesitated briefly. "It's not something I like thinking about is all. I don't have any parents, any family, because of that night. And people insist on reminding me of it."

"Oh," Ron said softly. "I guess I can imagine how I'd feel in my brothers were dead."

"They go to Hogwarts too?" Harry asked.

"All except Bill and Charlie, they've already graduated," Ron said. "Percy, Percival actually, is a fifth year this year and Prefect to boot. Fred and George, they're third years, pranksters, best to watch out for them."

Harry nodded.

The cardboard shoebox on top of Ron's trunk rustled and then bucked.

Ron took the top off and pulled out a large, grey, somewhat the worse for wear, rat. "Scabbers," he said. "He was Percy's, Charlie's before that. When Perce made Prefect Mum and Dad got him an owl. Fred and George gave me a spell that's supposed to turn him yellow. Now that we're on the train I suppose it's legal now, right?"

The compartment door opened before Harry could reply, and a girl with the bushiest hair that Harry had ever seen poked her head in. "Has anyone seen a toad?"

"A toad?" Harry asked.

"Neville Longbottom lost his," she said, dragging a short, round-faced boy into the compartment. "Oooh, are you going to do magic?" she closed the compartment and sat down on Harry's trunk. "Well, go on."

Ron frowned, then screwed up his eyes and pointed his wand at the rat and repeated a short rhyme.

"Well, that wasn't a very good spell," the girl said as the door quietly slid open behind her. "I've tried several spells at home and they all worked perfectly. Nobody in my family is magic at all, it was such a surprise when my letter came, but I was ever so please, of course, I mean, it's the best school of magic, or so I heard—I've learned all the books by heart of course, I just hope it's enough—"

"Breathe, girl."

Harry watched in amazement as Hermione nearly levitated without using her wand. "Who are you?" she demanded as the newest person in the compartment slid the door closed.

"Allie," Harry said with a relieved grin at seeing his friend. Like Hermione, she was already wearing her robes.

"You already know a, what, fourth year?" Ron asked.

"Transfer student," she said, offering a hand. "You can call me Elissa Blackthorn, but I prefer Allie."

"I'm Hermione Granger, by the way," Hermione said, shaking the hand briskly.

"Ron Weasley," Ron said with a frown.

"Harry Potter," Harry said.

"Are you really?" she asked, leaning forward and examining Harry as though he were a particularly interesting insect. "I got a few extra books for background and I've read all about you of course."

"Of course," Harry said, the words strangled in his throat.

She nodded happily. "Oh yes, Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts, Famous Wizards of the 20th Century, Modern Magical History, the Wizard's Compendium—"

"Did you try Who's Who and Which Witch?" Allie asked sarcastically.

Hermione frowned slightly at the other girl, then brushed it off as the Hogwarts' Express' loosed a blast from its whistle as they rattled through a small country town. "My Dad collects model trains, I shall have to get him one painted like the Hogwarts Express. Do you know what kind of train this is?"

"Of Course," Harry said, pleased to have an answer for her. "It's a magic train."

"I know it's a magic train. Actually, it's a Great Western Railway 4-6-0 4900/Hall-class steam locomotive, number 5972½. It is the so-called 'missing hall', the muggles able to account for only 259 of a production run of 260. Its predecessor, GWR 4900 5972 'Olton Hall' was built in April, 1937 at GWR's Swindon Works. The Express rolled off their lines a month later. It weighs 168,000 pounds and—"

"You do love listening to yourself talk, don't you?" Allie asked.

Hermione glared at her, sniffed, and turned back to Harry. "Do any of you know what House you'll be in? Gryffindor sounds the best from all that I've heard. Dumbledore himself is said to have been in Gryffindor—though I suppose it wouldn't be too bad to be in Ravenclaw." She turned to Allie, "Do you know if you'll get sorted with the rest of us, or have they made special arrangements? I don't remember anything in Hogwarts, a History about accepting transfer students."

Allie extended her hand, palm down, and rocked it back and forth in a so-so gesture. "Transfer is the closest term, not the best. I haven't had any formal magical education yet. That's not common, but then, it's not unheard of for magic to suddenly and spontaneously manifest in people who should no sign of it before in moments of extreme stress. Professor Dumbledore has graciously allowed me to attend Hogwarts to make up that knowledge base."

"So you're entering as a first year?" Hermione asked. "Aren't you too old?"

Allie gave her an unfriendly smile. "Something like that. I actually do have a little magical training, just nothing taught in Hogwarts. At least not to first years."

Hermione frowned, "I thought a basic proficiency was mandatory before moving onto more complex magics that require a blending of multiple disciplines."

"Been reading ahead?" Allie asked.

Hermione blushed, "A little."

Harry raised an eyebrow and Allie smirked.

"A lot," Hermione admitted.

"I've studied non-focus magic," Allie said.

"That's supposed to be incredibly difficult," Hermione said.

"It depends on the type of magic," Allie said, crossing her arms. "If you were talking about simply not using a wand for the type of magic where one would normally be used...you'd be right."

"It sounds fascinating. I'd love to talk about it," Hermione said. "But Neville and I had best be off finding his toad."

Harry stood, "Need one more to help look?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow, "You want to help Neville look for his toad?"

"Yeah, why?" Harry asked. "There isn't anything wrong with that...is there?"

"No, I just didn't think that you would—"

The compartment door slid open again and the short, pale, sickle-haired boy he recognized from Madam Milkins, flanked by matching book-ends that looked a lot like Dudley with less fat and more...bulk—if such a thing was possible—sauntered into the compartment. He watched Harry with a lot more interest than he had in the shop.

"Is it true? They're saying all up and down the train that Harry Potter is in this compartment. So it's you, is it?"

Harry nodded and glanced at the other boys, they looked rather like bodyguards.

"Oh, these are Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe, and I'm Malfoy. Draco Malfoy."

Ron coughed.

"Think my name is funny, do you?" Draco asked. "No need to ask who you are, my father told me all about the Weasleys. Red hair, freckles, more kids than they can afford."

Ron's cough turned into a strangled sound.

"Longbottom," Draco sneered at Neville, then turned to the two girls in the compartment. "I don't know you two."

"Hermione Granger," Hermione offered a hand.

Draco wrinkled his nose as though something unappealing had just been shoved in his face. "Muggleborn, are you," his tone made it clear it wasn't a question.

"Why, yes I am," Hermione replied.

"I suppose you're one too," Draco said distastefully as he eyed Allie.

Allie contemplated him for a moment before slowly smirking back at him, "You may call me Elissa Blackthorn."

"Thought so. The distinct pure-blood Blackthorn line has been dead for centuries," he said. "Father would have told me if one of them had suddenly shown up from nowhere. Especially at Hogwarts, he's on the Board of Governors you see."

"I can hardly help what you think you know," Allie said. "But I should point out that the Blackthorn family has been officially extinct as a distinct family for less than a century and a half."

"Not that you can call those miserable old hags that absorbed it a true Family," Draco sniffed. "Besides, father says that their reputation comes from rumors and stories that they've been spreading for generations."

"Well then, I suppose you have nothing to worry about," Allie said softly.

Draco frowned, "You can't be implying that you are one of them."

"Not implying, no," she said.

"What's your lineage?" the blond demanded imperiously.

Allie snorted, "What makes you think that I have any interest in your lineage?"

"Excuse me," Hermione said as Draco's pale cheeks tinged pink, "but is there some sort of wizarding nobility? I didn't read about any, but I'm beginning to wonder if I picked up all the books I should have. Several seem to take a great deal of background knowledge for granted."

"Not in the way you mean," Allie said calmly without turning from Draco. "There aren't any nobles in the sense that some old man in a draughty castle decided someone needed rewarding because of his political support. Though now that you mention it I think there are a handful of baronies and whatnot that are extinct in the mundane world but still floating around in the magical, not that it matters or anyone notices...mostly."

"That's right," Draco said with a puzzled frown at her. He turned to Hermione and sneered, "We're better because the purest of magic flows in the veins of the old magical families. Unlike you people who are new to the Arte."

Harry frowned and Hermione scowled at him while Ron made a gagging sound that drew a scornful look from the other boy.

He turned dismissively away from her to Harry. "You find that in the wizarding world, Potter, that some families are much better than others. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."

"I think I can tell for myself who the wrong sort are," Harry said.

"I'd be a bit politer if I were you, Potter," Draco said, his voice coming out in a furious hiss as his cheeks turned a darker shade of pink. "Or you'll go the same way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them either. If you hang around riff-raff like the Weasleys and muggleborns it'll rub off on you."

Both Harry and Ron stood up.

"What are you going to do?" Draco sneered. "Fight us?"

"Unless you get out now," Harry said, trying to sound braver than he felt. There were more of them but Crabbe and Goyle were bigger and Hermione seemed more likely to sit back and sniff disapprovingly, and Allie...well, he didn't want her to risk losing her place at Hogwarts so he'd just as soon she didn't fight.

"But we don't want to leave, do we, boys?" Draco asked Crabbe and Goyle.

Goyle grinned and grabbed onto Ron's shoulder, but before Ron could do anything he suddenly shrieked and jumped back. Scabbers the rat hung from one finger, tiny teeth dug tightly into a knuckle. Goyle swung his arm violently, Scabbers the rat whirled round and round as Hermione screamed.

With a last great wave of Goyle's arm, Scabbers went flying and hit Neville who thumped back onto his seat with a cry. The three boys disappeared quickly after that.

"I can't believe—" Hermione was saying to herself, "fighting." Then, more loudly, "we're all going to be in trouble before we even get there!"

"You're only in trouble if you get caught," Allie said philosophically.

Hermione gave the older girl a look generally reserved for those who stand up in the middle of church and announce that they've taken up devil worship and everyone is invited to their house for a Black Mass and lemonade.

"Y-you do know that you—" Neville stopped as Allie turned and looked at him.

"That I insulted him?" Allie asked. "Oh yes."

"You did?" Hermione asked to which Allie nodded an affirmative reply.

Harry snorted softly as the quest for knowledge caused the bushy-haired girl to stop worry about their impending expulsion.

"By not saying she was interested in his lineage she said that he isn't worth her time or consideration," Ron said, apparently quite happy to prove himself after his earlier failure with the color-changing spell. "That he was beneath her notice. For someone from one of the old, traditional magical families, that's a major insult."

Neville nodded, "My Gran says that the Malfoys are one of the oldest and most traditional families, and they have loads of gold and father has a lot of connections at the Ministry."

"They aren't as old as the Thorne family, are they?" Harry asked. He realized that it might not be a question Allie would like him asking and looked to her, but she had managed to slip out of the compartment without anyone noticing.

Ron looked at him askance. "The Thornes are a really old family of witches, Harry. Heck, they were around before Merlin was. But they're...scary. If you believe half the stories that are told about them they have claim to a lot of magic that no one else knows. They're supposed to have an island that only they can go to that is more magically powerful than Hogwarts and capable moving around on its own and even able to fly. They're supposed to be able to walk between shadows, travel through time, raise the dead, ride dragons, control hordes of giants and trolls and other magical creatures, command seas and storms, and do powerful magic without the use of wand or other focus."

"They can command monsters, my Gran says," Neville whispered.

"Right," Ron agreed with a nod. "There are stories about how they one Thorne could control hordes of rats, entire clans of giants, or even a nest of acromantulas—" he shuddered but pressed on "—without using any kind of bewitchment. They supposedly were able to control a flock of birds that was so big it could blot out the sun and strip farm fields in minutes. They were supposed to be tried by the International Confederation of Wizards for breach of the Secrecy Statutes, but they had the muggles kill all the birds before the trials could begin."

"But that's all just stories," Hermione huffed. "Nobody can control giants, not even with magic. Their skin is too tough, most spells just bounce off."

Neville nodded in agreement.

"As for flocks of birds, those stories are probably thinking about the passenger pigeon which the muggles made extinct in the late nineteenth century."

"And as far as dragons are concerned—pff," Ron added. "My brother Charlie is a Dragon Keeper for a dragon preserve in Romania. It takes a dozen specially trained handlers just to keep one dragon inside the preserve, never mind keep it calm enough so that it doesn't start attacking the keepers or other dragons. They're impossible to ride, most of 'em would eat you first and the ones that wouldn't would feed you to their dragonets."

"Charming," Hermione said drolly. She turned to Neville, "Come on, Neville, let's go find your toad."

"They're gonna be in Slytherin for sure," Ron said as Hermione and Neville left in search of Neville's toad.

"Neville and Hermione?" Harry asked doubtfully.

"Malfoy and that other girl," Ron said.

"Allie's my friend," Harry told Ron.

Ron grimaced.

"She saved me, and she didn't have to," Harry added.

"Eh," Ron said, he picked up Scabbers and frowned. "I don't believe it, he's sleeping again." He sighed and shrugged his shoulders as he put Scabbers back in his box, "It was a stupid spell anyway," he muttered. "George gave it to me. I bet he knew it was a dud."

"What house are your brothers in?"

"Gryffindor the lot of them, Mum and Dad too. I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad as long as she isn't in it, but imagine if they put me in Slytherin. What's your Quidditch team?"

"I, uh, don't really know a lot about—"

And before Harry could finish Ron was off into a vivid description of the "best game in the world" almost as fast as Hermione's earlier discourse on how she got her letter.

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There was a knock on the door an hour later that saved Harry from an involved explanation about two chasers, a beater, a seeker, three balls, and an assortment of odds and ends pulled from trunks to illustrate.

"Anything off the cart, dears?" asked a witch pushing a cart full of sweets.

Harry looked at Ron.

"Never mind me," Ron said, "Mom sent lunches with us." He opened a brown paper bag and made a face. "Corned beef. She never remembers that I don't like it."

"Oh yes," Harry said, standing up. He'd never had pocket money before he'd left the Dursleys, and even though he'd had gold and silver since, he'd never had a chance to spend it on candy. Now that he had the chance he fully intended to cram his pockets full of as many mars bars as he could—but the woman didn't have any. What she did have were Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, Chocolate Frogs, Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Licorice Wands, Cockroach Cluster, Blood Pops, and a number of other strange things Harry had never seen in his life. Not wanting to miss out on this new opportunity he bought some of everything and paid a dozen silver sickles and a few bronze knuts.

"Go ahead and have a pasty," Harry said, seeing Ron eye the candy.

"Well, if you're sure," Ron said after a moment and tore open a pasty.

The door edged open and a pale-looking cat squeezed into the compartment. It hopped up onto the seat next to Harry, picked up a blood pop, and looked at him imploringly until he opened it.

"Weird cat," Ron said.

The cat glared at Ron and flashed needle-sharp fangs, but didn't make any sound as it returned to the blood pop.

Harry ripped open the pack and picked up the card. Albus Dumbledore waved at him from a small portrait, then gestured down. Harry looked down at the chocolate frog in time to see it hop out of the box and make a break for it.

"I thought you said they weren't real!"

"They aren't," Ron explained as the Chocolate Frog hopped onto the trunk and croaked an obnoxiously loud croak. "It's a charm of some kind. That's why you have to remember to—"

Exactly what he had to do Harry missed as the Frog hopped towards the window. He lunged for it and missed, and the Frog landed on the window.

"It's going to escape," Ron warned just before a pale blur slammed into the window.

The pale cat caught the Frog, the just as easily sprang off the window and landed neatly on Harry's trunk. It put the frog down and pinned it down with one paw, while it bit off the Frog's black legs. It gave Harry a look as though to say 'that's how it's done', as it licked chocolate from its red-stained muzzle. The cat picked the frog back up and hopped to Harry's bench where it dumped the frog, leaving it scrambling feebly around. After a few seconds it fell still as the charm expired. The cat sniffed, then returned to its blood pop.

"Really weird cat," Ron said.

Harry nodded, "Any idea who it belongs to?"

Ron shook his head and gestured towards the famous wizard card. "Did you get Agrippa?"

"No, Dumbledore," Harry said.

"Oh, I've got him. Can I have a frog? I met get Agrippa."

Harry nodded and Ron opened a box, neatly plucked the frog out of the air, and broke its back legs. Turning away from where his new

friend was tormenting the animated chocolate, Harry turned the Frog card over and read:

Albus Dumbledore

Currently: Headmaster of Hogwarts

Considered by many to be the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicholas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling.

He turned the card back over. The portrait was empty. "Hey, where did he go?"

Ron looked over at Harry. "Well, you can't expect him to sit around all day, can you?" He looked at the card in his hand as he sucked on a Frog leg. "No, I've got Morgana again and I've got about six of her. You want it? You can start collecting."

The door slid open as Allie ducked into the compartment and collapsed onto the beach across from Harry's.

Ron slid away from her until he was pressed up against the window. "Why aren't you off toadying with your new friend?" Ron asked.

"Draco doesn't have friends, he has minions," Allie said disgustedly, not bothering to hide where she was. "Besides, every other sentence of his began 'my father'. It was getting tiring."

Before Harry could respond the cat hopped up onto his trunk and dropped the stick from the blood pop and sat staring at him expectantly.

"You want another one?" Harry asked.

The cat blinked its sapphire-colored eyes at him.

"Weird cat," Ron muttered as Harry unwrapped another blood pop.

"Who's a weird—" Allie began, then stopped. "Kami. What are you doing here?"

The cat turned and blinked at her.

"Your cat?" Harry asked.

"No," Allie said firmly. "She shows up to annoy me and then vanishes just as quick. I thought she lived in an apartment on the floor below mine."

"So you don't want her?"

"Not particularly," Allie said, getting up. "Look, I'm going to go check on the twins, okay?"

The cat looked up at her briefly as Allie left, then returned to lapping at its second blood pop.

"Is she crazy?" Ron asked abruptly.

Harry frowned at him, "Allie has her own way of doing things."

The compartment door opened and Padma and Parvati poured into the compartment. "There's a pint-sized teacher out there patrolling the train cars," Parvati announced.

"Ron, Parvati and Padma Patil," Harry said. "Parvati, Padma; Ron Weasley."

Both nodded brief 'hello's as they dug through their trunks for robes

"Allie's looking for you," Harry said.

"We'll go looking for her," Padma assured him as they slammed the lids closed, and disappeared again out the door.

"Are they always like that?" Ron asked.

"Padma only when she doesn't have a book. Parvati...pretty much," Harry said. "Have you heard of the Malfoys before?"

The door opened and Hermione popped back into the compartment.

"From my dad," Ron said, ignoring the bushy-haired girl. "They were some of the first to come back to our side after You-Know-Who disappeared. Said they'd been bewitched. Dad doesn't believe it, says they didn't need an excuse to go Dark." He turned to Hermione, "Can we help you with something?"

"I only came in because some people are acting very childish. Racing up and down the passages shrieking," Hermione sniffed. "And you've got dirt on your nose, did you know? You should change soon. I expect we'll be arriving shortly."

"My," Harry said, recalling a book he'd just finished reading in his Primary's library before that fateful zoo trip as Hermione left the compartment again. "People do come and go quickly here." He shook his head.

"So what do your brothers do?" he asked, searching in his trunk for his robes. "You said Charlie did something with dragons."

"Well," Ron said. "Charlie is in Romania studying dragons. He's a great Seeker, could have played for England. And Bill is in Egypt, he's a Curse Breaker for Gringotts. Say, did you hear about Gringotts? It's been all over the Daily Prophet, someone tried to rob one of the high security vaults."

Harry stared at him. "Really? What happened to them?"

"Nothing, that's why it's such big news. They haven't been caught. Apparently they didn't take anything either. My dad says it must have been a powerfully Dark wizard to break into a Gringotts vault and get out without being discovered, much less caught. Of course, everyone gets scared when something like this happens in case You-Know-Who's behind it."

Harry and Ron quickly changed into their long robes as a voice came on saying that they'd arrive in five minutes and everyone was to leave their baggage in the train.

They stumbled out onto a small, dark platform, and Harry shivered against the chill.

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here!" A voice said as a lantern came bobbing over the head of the kids.

Harry recognized it from their brief meeting in Diagon Alley.

"Hagrid!"

"Harry! You all right there!"

"I'm wonderful!" Harry said.

"Right then—you stick close and follow me," Hagrid said. "Any more Firs' years? You lot watch yer step and follow me!"

He led them down a path so dark Harry thought there must be thick trees towering above them on either side. The lantern bobbed before them, but aside from something to follow it didn't seem to cast any light on the path. Nobody made much sound aside from Neville who sniffed once or twice.

Harry felt someone brush past him lightly, then a voice asking: "Neville?"

"Yes?" the boy asked.

"You misplaced your toad?"

"Trevor!" Neville said happily. "Thank you, ah..." he looked around, paused to turn around and stopped right in front of Harry who bumped into him. "Did you see—"

"It was Allie, I think," Harry said. He was sure it was her, but where was she?

"Oh," Neville said.

The path wound down and around until they ran out of ground at the side of a great black lake. Mountains, dark silhouettes against the star-studded cloak of night, seemed to frame the far end, but Harry suspected that they were actually further off than that. Across the lack from where they stood, perched on some sort of cliff overlooking the lake, was a castle. Light, welcoming and warm poured from its windows.

"Right now, no more than four to a boat."

Harry found himself in a small boat with Hermione, Neville, and Ron. The Patil twins quickly claimed the next boat followed by Allie and a boy Harry didn't recognize.

"Everybody in? Right then, FORWARD!"

The boats started to drift across the glassine lake. Ripples trailed behind them as small waves burbled at their bows.

"Wow," Harry breathed.

"They do set you up to be impressed, don't they?" Allie asked from her boat. She was trailing her hand in the water, and when she pulled it out, gossamer strands of some glowing stuff, like the sticky remnants of a spider web, trailed from her fingers.

They sailed towards the sheer cliff that Hogwarts was perched on top of until Harry thought they were going to run into it.

"Heads down, ever'one," Hagrid's voice came, and they all ducked as the boats sailed through a thick curtain of ivy that hung from the cliff; totally shrouding a passage cut into the stone.

They drifted through a series of natural caverns until they reached an underground dock and the boats scrapped up on a pebble-bed lining the shore. Hagrid led them along a path through another cavern and they spilled out onto cool, damp grass right in the shadow of the castle. They went up a flight of steps to a great wooden door which he pounded on three times.

I do not own Harry Potter. I do not own The Polar Express. I do not even own a model train set with a model of the Olton Hall in the livery and paintjob of the Hogwarts Express.

Chapter 6: Home

"A home is not a mere transient shelter: its essence lies in its permanence, in its capacity for accretion and solidification, in its quality of representing, in all its details, the personalities of the people who live in it."

-H.L. Mencken

The door opened immediately and a witch in emerald-green robes with black hair pulled back into a severe-looking bun stood in the light. She had a face as severe-looking as the bun, and Harry's first impression was that she was not someone to cross.

"The first years, Professor McGonagall," Hagrid said.

She pulled the doors wide and gestured them in. The entrance hall was so big that the Dursleys' entire house would have been lost in it. Torches, like those in Gringotts, burned along the walls and the ceiling was lost in shadows somewhere far above. A magnificent staircase of polished marble led to upper floors.

McGonagall led them across the flag-stones. Harry heard the hashed murmured of hundreds of voices from a set of doors to the right. Apparently the rest of the school was already in attendance, but she led them past the doors to a smallish chamber.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," McGonagall said as they crowded somewhat more closely together than they might have otherwise. "The start-of-term banquet will commence shortly; but before you take your seats in the Great Hall you must be sorted into your houses..."

She continued to deliver what sounded to Harry like an extremely well-rehearsed speech. Considering how antiquated Diagon Alley and the train were, it could very well have been the same speech that greeted the very first class of students.

"The four houses are Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each is named for one of the four Founders of Hogwarts, has its own Noble history, and has produced outstanding wizards and witches..."

Harry glanced over to find Padma standing next to him. "Do you think—"

"Shh," Hermione hissed, staring at McGonagall with a rapt expression. "It's the traditional Welcome to Hogwarts speech! This is the very same speech penned by Rowena Ravenclaw to greet the very first class of students. I read about it in *Hogwarts, a History*."

"The Sorting will commence in a few moments. I suggest that you do your best to smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting." Her gaze lingered on Neville's cloak which was fastened near one ear, and Ron's dirt-smudged nose. "I will return when we are ready for you. Please wait quietly."

She left the chamber.

"How exactly do they sort us into houses?" he whispered to Ron who had been standing behind him and trying to keep Harry between himself and Hermione who was now correcting Neville's cloak, but would undoubtedly have turned on his dirt-smudged nose had she seen the other boy first.

"Some sort of test, I think. Fred said it hurts a lot, but he might have been joking...I hope."

A test? In front of the whole school? But he didn't know any magic yet—what on earth would he have to do? He hadn't expected something like this the moment they arrived. Harry looked around anxiously and saw that everyone else looked terrified, too. No one was talking much except Hermione Granger, who was now whispering very fast about all the spells she'd learned and wondering which one she'd need to an increasingly panic-struck Neville Longbottom.

"It'll be all right, Harry," Allie said as she brushed past him.

"Allie, what—"

"Relax," she smirked at him.

"Relax?" he repeated, not caring at all for how his voice squeaked.

"It can't be anything too bad," she said reasonably. "People have been coming here for almost a thousand years. If it really were

painful, don't you think they'd have put an end to it by now?" She glanced at Hermione, "And unlike Granger most of the people coming her don't really know any practical magic yet, so that's off the table." She raised her voice, "and since people clearly survive to graduate I doubt any of us will be wrestling a troll."

Padma snickered as Ron's ears turned red. "Twins?" she asked.

Ron nodded.

"Twins?" Harry asked. "You mean Parvati?"

Padma shook her head. "Ron's twin brothers, Fred and George, are prankers. Troll-wrestling is just the kind of thing they'd come up with."

"Oh, so you knew Ron already?" Harry asked. It hadn't seemed like it on the train.

Padma shrugged. "Most of us in pureblood families know each other already, Harry. Even if only in passing."

Professor McGonagall returned, and the ghosts that had shown up to argue about whether or not to give some being named 'Peeves' a second chance slowly trickled out of the room through the walls, floors, and in one case, a student.

"Form a line," Professor McGonagall told them, "And follow me."

Feeling oddly as though his legs had turned to lead, Harry got into line behind a boy with sandy hair, with Ron behind him; until Padma and Ron squeezed into the line ahead of and behind him. They were lead out of the chamber, across the entrance hall, and through a set of large double doors into the Great Hall.

Harry had never dreamed of such a place. The long hall was lit by thousands upon thousands of candles, all hovering in mid-air over four long tables where the rest of the students sat. A fifth table on a small dais over-looking the student tables was reserved for the staff. Each table had a snow-white table-cloth trimmed in two colors that Harry guessed must be used to tell the houses apart. Gold platters and crystal goblets gleamed and glittered on the tables and stone

walls—polished to glass-like smoothness—gleamed a gentle honey-like color in the candle-light.

The faces of the students, Harry saw as McGonagall led them up to the dais, glowed like lamps in the candle-light, and to avoid looking at them he stared up at the ceiling. It was like someone had draped it in purple velvet so dark it was almost black, and then charmed little lights in it to glow like stars; and for a moment, that's exactly what he thought had happened. Then he heard Hermione whisper: "It's charmed to look like the sky outside. I read about it in Hogwarts, a History."

McGonagall placed a stool in front of the staff table, and set a wide-brimmed, exceedingly battered-looking hat on it. It was old and frayed with many patches that had been patched-over in turn, and really quite dirty. If his Aunt Petunia saw it in her house, Harry thought, she'd probably have a heart attack.

Then its brim ripped open and it began to sing. Harry tried to keep up with the song—something about caps and hats and the four houses—but he was too busy trying to take it in. Seeing Diagon alley had been an odd experience, but he hadn't really seen any magic as he thought it would be like. The Patil's dishes and the invisible barrier to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ had been like something out of the rare glimpses he got of movies that the Dursleys watched on the telly. Allie's apartment had been magical, but he'd been too busy waking up and not a little scared for what he'd seen to really sink in. But a singing hat? A hat that was somehow going to tell him what house he was in? That had to be magic. And not an awe-inspiring, scary piece of magic, or something out of a movie, but more...real somehow.

McGonagall strode forward with a long roll of parchment, "When I call your name you will place your hat on your head and sit on the stool to be sorted." She looked down at the parchment, "Abbot, Hannah!"

A pink-faced girl with blond pig-tails stumbled out of the line. The hat fell past her eyes and for a moment nothing happened. Then the brim of the hat opened and it shouted: "HUFFLEPUFF!"

The table with black and yellow borders on their tablecloth erupted in cheers, and Hannah replaced the hat on the stool before jumping down to join them where she was soon joined by: "Bones, Susan".

Terry Boot was sent to Ravenclaw—blue and bronze borders—where he was joined a moment later by Mandy Brocklehurst; and then 'Brown, Lavender' became the first new Gryffindor and was cheered to her new House by a table with red and gold trim.

Harry noticed that it took longer with some people than with others; Seamus Finnigan spent almost a minute under the hat before being sent to Gryffindor, and Hermione spent even longer on the small stool before joining him. Ron was clearly dismayed by this, but he kept his displeasure down to a groan. Draco Malfoy was the fastest Sorted, being sent to Slytherin before the Hat even touched his head.

Harry watched as "Moon, Nott, and Parkinson" went up, two boys and a girl. Moon became a Hufflepuff, but the other two joined Slytherin and then it was Padma's turn and she was made a Ravenclaw. That almost settled the issue of which house he wanted to be in for Harry. He wanted to be with his new-found friends and it was clear that Allie wasn't going to be sorted until the end; but then Parvati, after a moment, was placed in Gryffindor and Perks, Sally-Ann took her turn under the hat, and then it was...

"Potter, Harry!"

Harry stepped forward before he realized he was moving and the hall hushed into furious whispers as he took his place on the stool and lowered the hat over his eyes

"Hmm," a voice said in his ear. "Difficult, very difficult. Not a bad mind, I see, and you've got a good deal of courage. Loyalty too, at least to some people, and a thirst to prove yourself."

"Um...who are you?" Harry asked.

"I'm the Sorting Hat, didn't you listen to the song? No, I can see that you were too busy looking around. That's all right, magic takes some getting used to if you aren't familiar with it. It's my job to place you in your house."

"Oh," Harry said.

"Now, where to put you, hmmm. I daresay that you'd be good for Ravenclaw. It'd do a world of good for those intellectuals who live in the Tower of Ivory and Silver to have to deal with someone more apt to the practical workings of magic. But as good as you would be for them, I doubt the same could be said of them for you.

"You'd do well enough in Gryffindor, oh yes. Plenty of courage. There's Talent oh my goodness, yes—and a thirst to prove yourself, interesting, perhaps Sly—"

"Not Slytherin," Harry whispered, thinking of Malfoy. Ravenclaw or Gryffindor sounded good.

"No?" the Hat asked. "Why ever not? You could be great, you know, and Slytherin will certainly help you on that path—"

"I don't want to be great," Harry said. "I don't want to be famous. I just want to have friends and be allowed to be me."

The Hat fell silent. "I see," it said at last. "In that case neither Slytherin nor Gryffindor will suit you well."

"What?" Harry blurted out loud.

"One will be expecting you to work towards greatness," the Hat told him. "The other...the other will push you towards it. No, if that is how you feel about it then there is only one place for you. HUFFLEPUFF!"

It took Harry a moment to realize that this last had actually been said aloud, and he hopped off the stool and placed the Hat on it before walking down toward the Hufflepuff table as the entire hall watched in dead silence. Just before he reached the table it suddenly exploded into applause and a girl he recognized as being sorted earlier waved him over. A boy about Allie's age stood and shook his arm vigorously as he approached and Harry found a seat next between him and the Fat Friar who patted his arm and left it feeling like he'd dunked it in ice water.

Meanwhile: Thomas, Dean—a black boy even taller than Ron—had gone to the Gryffindor table while Turpin, Lisa had joined Padma at the Ravenclaw table. And then it was Ron's turn. His freckles shown

against pale skin that had taken on a faintly green cast, and a second latter he stumbled away to join his brothers at the Gryffindor table. Finally Blaise Zabini was made a Slytherin, and only Allie was left.

McGonagall looked at her list and then up at Allie and pursed her lips.

Dumbledore stood, "Hogwarts prides itself in offering the best magical education there is," he said solemnly. "Rarely do we send students off to transfer to other schools, even more rarely do we accept them. This year we have a new student who is some years older than the other first years; a student who has had the rare opportunity to undergo an intensive period of study in a particularly obscure, but no less fascinating, branch of magic. She now joins us to further her own magical education and share some of her knowledge with us. Our last Sortie is Miss Elissa Blackthorn."

Allie took a seat on the stool and placed the Sorting Hat on her head.

Harry wondered what the Hat was saying to her, but no sooner had he thought the question than Allie spoke.

"If you want to know something, Sorting Hat, the polite thing to do is ask."

"That may be," the Sorting Hat said aloud. "But Sorting is dependant on what's inside of you, what makes up your character. I have to discover what you are made of—"

"Sugar, and spice, and everything nice," Allie replied dryly. "It says so on the label."

The entire school tittered.

"Ms. Blackthorn," Dumbledore said from where he'd reclaimed his throne-like chair. "Will you kindly let the Sorting Hat sort you?"

"You want me to take down my magical defenses, lower my shields, and lay my mind bare so that some thousand-year-old magical construct—that smells like it hasn't been washed in almost as long—can go traipsing through my mind without even a 'please'?" Allie asked.

The hall tittered again.

Dumbledore rubbed his forehead, "Please."

Allie sighed and pulled out a locket from her robes. She fiddled with it for a moment, then let it hang against her chest. "One word, Hat, and I'll drop you in a tub full of bleach."

The Sorting Hat said, "Understood," then seemed to scrunch up. It scrunched up more. Several stitches popped, a patch fell off, a seam partially separated, and it shuddered before gasping out: "Slytherin!"

Allie fiddled with the locket again and tucked it back inside her robes, then stood and returned the hat to the stool. "Bleach," she repeated warningly, then bounced down to the Slytherin table.

The hall was silent.

"She can't do that," the girl hissed from the other side of the table.

"Looks like she did it anyway," Harry observed. "Harry Potter."

"Susan Bones," the girl supplied.

Padma, who was sitting almost directly behind Harry at the Ravenclaw table, twisted in her seat to look at them. "You never met Allie, Sue? She's like that, " she said. "Take it from me, if she says she'll do something the only reason she won't follow through is because she literally unable to."

"Don't call me 'Sue'," Susan said.

"Then remember that I—"

"—don't like being called 'Pad'," both girls finished together and chuckled at what was evidently a long-standing joke.

Albus Dumbledore stood again. "All of you older students will recognize that Professor Quirrell has reclaimed his post as Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts. Now, I had some words to say to you, and here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!

"Thank you."

He sat back down as everyone clapped and cheered.

Harry glanced at the boy sitting next to him, "Is he mad?" he asked.

"Mad? He's a genius!" the boy said. "Cedric Diggory," he introduced himself. "Dumbledore is the greatest wizard there is," he continued. "But the greatest of minds are only very rarely normal—or stable, for that matter—ones, so he is a bit mad, yes. Potatoes, Harry?"

Harry's mouth fell open. The dishes in front of him were now piled with food. He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table: roast beef and roast chicken, lamb chops and pork chops, sausages, bacon and steak, potatoes (broiled, fried, and mashed), fries, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy (at least three kinds), ketchup, and, for some strange reason, peppermint humbugs.

"That does look good," the ghost on his other side said sadly, watching as Harry piled his plate with some of everything except the peppermints.

"Can't you—?"

"I haven't eaten in centuries," said the ghost. "I don't need to, of course, but one does miss it," he sighed, rubbing his thick middle. "I don't think I've introduced myself? I am the Fat Friar, Friar Huberd, at your service. Resident Ghost of Hufflepuff Sett."

"Pleased to meet you," Harry said.

"So—new Hufflepuffs!" the ghost went on, "I expect you will all do your best and help us win the house championship this year? We haven't quite set the record for longest stretch without winning it—we merely tied that at the end of last year—but I still remember the run of ill-luck in the sixteenth century. Now the Slytherins, they have won the Cup six years in a row! The Bloody Baron's becoming almost unbearable—he's the Slytherin ghost."

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and saw a horrible ghost sitting there, with blank staring eyes, a gaunt face, and robes stained with silver blood. He was sitting right next to Malfoy, who,

Harry was pleased to see, didn't look too happy with the arrangement. Allie sat on the other side of the ghost and did not seem at all bothered with her companion, and appeared to actually be conversing with it more than her fellow students.

"How did he get covered in blood?" Seamus asked.

"I've never asked," the Friar replied. "It isn't something that's done. Asking how one dies. It's a very personal experience. Now, everybody knows about Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, the Resident Ghost of Gryffindor Tower. He moans about it quite frequently. He had an unfortunate encounter with an executioner with a dull axe—actually, it was a back-country woodsman and the axe was better suited for taking limbs off trees than heads off necks, but you didn't hear that from me—almost five hundred years ago."

Harry nodded and glanced across to the Gryffindor table. Parvati was eating in the manner he had grown accustomed to; just as voracious, though more neatly, than Ron appeared to be. Next to them was a ghost with a very large ruff. Ron asked the ghost something and it grabbed its head and lifted. The head fell to one side, held on by a scrap of incorporeal skin, and giving a very good glimpse of the internal workings of the human neck, though oddly rendered in black-and-white.

As everyone finished, the remains of the food faded from the plates leaving them sparkling clean as before. A moment later the deserts appeared. Blocks of ice cream in every flavor you could think of—and quite a few that you couldn't—apple pies, treacle tarts, chocolate éclairs and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, Jell-O, rice pudding...

As Harry helped himself to a treacle tart, the talk turned to their families.

"I'm half-and-half," Susan said. "The Bones have been around for a long time, but unlike some other families we've never cared if someone was magic-born, half-born, or muggle-born." She grinned, "The family has an album of photos of reactions of those muggles marrying in, you can't legally tell them about magic until they're married into it," she explained for the muggleborns at the table, "So it comes as a bit of a shock."

The others laughed.

"It was for me," a boy a little taller than Harry said. "Justin Finch-Fletchley," he added. "A bit of a shock doesn't do it justice. Didn't believe the first letter, we thought it was someone having a go at us. We're pretty well off and you wouldn't believe some of the stuff people send us. The next morning an owl delivers my letter right into my eggs. Mum starts screaming and Cook is trying to chase it out while Dad calls pest control...it was a right mess. Utter chaos. And then we read the thing..."

"It took me ages to convince my parents to let me come. I was down for Eton, see?"

There was more laughter as Harry and Hannah, who had been the first person sorted, tried to explain to Ernie Macmillan and Samantha Roper how significant Eton was. In the end it was Justin who came back to their conversation and straightened Ernie out. "It's the equivalent of Hogwarts in the muggle world, Mate," he explained. "Absolutely the best there is. There are other schools, of course, there have to be considering the number of people in the muggle world, but Eton is right at the top."

Tuning out Wayne Hopkins' and Cedric's conversation on classes he turned to look at the High Table again. Hagrid was drinking deeply from his goblet. Professor McGonagall was talking to Professor Dumbledore. Professor Quirrell, in his absurd turban, was talking to a teacher with greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and sallow skin who he took a moment to recognize as the other teacher he'd met in Diagon Alley.

It happened very suddenly. Professor Snape looked past Quirrell's turban straight into Harry's eyes—and a sharp, hot pain shot across the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Ouch!" Harry clapped a hand to his head.

"What is it?" Cedric.

"N-nothing."

Cedric frowned slightly, but didn't say anything.

The pain had faded as quickly as it had come. Harder to shake was the feeling Harry had gotten from the teacher's look—a feeling that he didn't much care for Harry.

"I met Professor Quirrell in Diagon Alley," he told Cedric. "He seemed...really nervous. What are the other teachers like?"

"Nervous? Quirrell?" Cedric asked. "He wasn't here the year before last, took some sort of sabbatical..." he craned his head towards the high table. "I don't recall him being nervous." After a moment he shrugged and turned back to Harry.

"The short fellow is Professor Flitwick, he teaches charms and is Head of Ravenclaw. Used to be some sort of dueling champion in his youth, if I recall correctly. He's fun, energetic, quick-witted. The witch next to Professor Dumbledore is Professor McGonagall."

"Deputy Headmistress," Harry said.

"Right, she's responsible for sending out everyone's letters," Cedric said. "She teaches transfiguration and is Head of Gryffindor. She's fair, but strict. Of course, her subject can be a bit dangerous. Not at the level you'll be learning at right now but advanced transfigurations can have very unpleasant side-effects if you do them wrong."

"Since you already know Quirrell, the man next to him is Professor Snape, he's head of Slytherin and teaches Potions but he doesn't want to—everyone knows he's after Quirrell's job. Knows an awful lot about the Dark Arts..." Cedric said. "He's smart, but his teaching style...leaves something to be desired."

"Oh," Harry said. The man sitting at the high table looked like the man he suddenly remembered meeting in Diagon Alley, but that Professor Snape had seemed helpful, not particularly sociable, perhaps, but very...intense, Harry decided. This one seemed very upset and unable to do more than scowl, maybe because he hadn't gotten the Defense Against the Dark Arts job? And why did Professor Snape make his scar hurt now when he hadn't when they'd met in Diagon Alley?

"...and Arithmancy respectively, both are third-year electives. The short, stout witch in grey is Professor Sprout who teaches Herbology and is our Head of House. Next to her, continuing towards the

center, are Professors Sinistra and Hooch. Sinistra teaches Astronomy, while Professor Hooch is our flying instructor and referees the inter-house Quidditch games."

"Flying instructor?" Harry asked. Wizards and Witches drove airplanes? He suppose magic was a good reason for keeping the large metal constructs in the air, though how they managed to keep the mundanes from knowing he had no idea.

"Brooms, of course," Cedric said. "A lot of magic-born wizards and witches come here thinking they already know how to fly but there are usually two or three who've been doing it wrong the whole time." He nodded back at the table, "the wizard with the peg leg, hook for a left hand, and the eyepatch is Professor Kettleburn and he teaches Care of Magical Creatures, another elective. It looks like Professors Burbage and Trelawny didn't make it down, they teach the other two electives, Muggle Studies and Divination. Burbage was gone last year, Quirrell taught her post, though honestly MS is something of a joke, though what the joke is depends on whether your muggle-born or magic-born. I can't say that Trelawny absence is unusual, she almost never shows herself out of the North Tower. Binns, who teaches History of Magic is a ghost so I'm not surprised he isn't here either. I'm not sure where Burbage is though..."

Harry thanked Cedric, but all he felt was like he'd been left with more questions than answers. He silently observed the high table for the rest of the meal, but Professor Snape never looked at him again and at length the desserts disappeared and Dumbledore climbed to his feet again. The hall fell silent.

"Just a few words now that you're all fed and watered. First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well." Dumbledore's twinkling eyes flashed in the direction of the Gryffindor table.

"I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch.

"And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

Harry laughed, but he was one of the few that did.

"He's not serious," Harry muttered.

Susan frowned, "He doesn't appear to be joking."

Cedric nodded. "It is odd," he agreed, "He usually gives us a reason why we're not allowed to go somewhere. The forest's full of dangerous beasts—everyone knows that. I wonder if he told the Prefects anything."

"And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!" cried Dumbledore. Harry noticed that the other teachers' smiles had become rather fixed.

Dumbledore gave his wand a flick and a ribbon shot out of it. It rose into the air high above the tables and twisted itself into words.

"Everyone pick their favorite tune, and off we go!"

The Hall bellowed as students and teachers took off in a couple of hundred different tunes. Some took it at a rapid pace, trying to get through it in a rush. Others, like Harry, struggled along and tried not to let their chosen tune get mixed up in somebody else's. Finally there were only the Weasley twins were left singing a slow, somber funeral march. Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling merrily away as he conducted the last few lines with his wand, and when the duo had finished, he was one of the ones who clapped the loudest.

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A fifth-year Prefect named Eric Bryce led them through a bewildering maze of corridors and passages and stairways until Harry was thoroughly confused and left with the feeling that they had looped on themselves at least twice—and became positive of it after they passed by a large painting of a bowl of fruit no less than three times—before being left at a dead end in front of a painting.

"This is the Campfire," Bryce said, indicating the painting of a small clearing in a forest at night. People filled the clearing, some dressed in forest tones, others in bright colors, some danced, while others played instruments, and a great many of them feasted and drank. In the center was a roaring bonfire.

"Gryffindor and Ravenclaw both have towers, and Slytherin commons is somewhere in the dungeons under the lake," Bryce said. "We Hufflepuffs have the Sett. Now, there are passages leading from the common room to many different parts of the school. Getting out is easy, but unless you know each one's secret, you can't get back in. All of those passages will only open for someone wearing the Hufflepuff badge and then only if they know how to open that entrance."

"What are the secrets then?" Wayne asked.

Bryce smiled. "This is the main entrance," he said without answering Wayne's question. "The secret for this one is that there is no secret. You just walk into the painting and you're in the Hufflepuff commons. Try not to get lost in the forest." He turned and stepped up into the painting and disappeared.

Harry exchanged a look with Justin, then hesitantly stepped up to the painting and reached out. The painting was solid under his fingers.

"Well?" Susan asked.

"Seems solid," Harry said.

"Solid, right," Ernie said. "I've seen a looking-glass like this; they only come across as solid if you act like they are. Harry, it's just like Platform 9 just walk into it like it isn't there."

Harry nodded and stepped into the painting and found himself in a forest, dark trees stood on either side of him, their branches blocking out the stars above but he could see a campfire burning merrily in a clearing ahead of him. He took another step, and then another, the clearing didn't seem to get any closer but four steps later he emerged in a room that was low-ceilinged and warm. The walls were a soft golden-colored wood that curved out from the floor and then in until they weren't walls but the ceiling. A dark reddish-brown wood

served as floors and circular beams. A great stone fireplace took up most of one wall, and a multitude of circular passages led off in different directions, some with stairs going down and others with stairs going up. The room was filled with comfortable and sturdy-looking couches and armchairs that occupied the center of the room with tables that ranged from seating one or two, up to a monster capable of seating two dozen, against the walls.

"I see you made it all right," Bryce said. "Everyone here? Good. As you noticed there's no password on that door. We assume if you know how to find it, and how it works, then you are supposed to be here."

Harry nodded in understanding.

"Finding it can be a little tricky, but if you get lost any other Hufflepuff or the Fat Friar will be glad to help you on your way, either to here or to any class you need to get to. Same goes for most of the ghosts, but let me warn you, Peeves is worth two dead-ends and a trick staircase if you ask him for help." Bryce waved around the room. "The internal geography can be a bit confusing. Hogwarts likes to rearrange itself without warning, but you'll get the hang of it in a couple of weeks. The teachers understand and most of them won't punish you if you're a little late for the first few lessons.

"Feel free to explore during your free time. Hogwarts has loads of secret passages and chambers, and I don't think that even Headmaster Dumbledore knows everything about this place. The burrows that make up the sett," Bryce gestured towards a few of the corridors, "are an easy way of getting around, but they don't go everywhere. Also, they are really twisted around and like to rearrange themselves just as much as the rest of Hogwarts so it can end up taking longer to get into them, come here, and then use them to get to your next class than it would be to get to your next class through the more public corridors."

He pointed towards another pair of corridors, "Through there you'll find practice rooms, a couple of potion labs, and a library. The practice rooms and labs have a list of what spells and potions you can work on by yourself, which ones you can work on with a partner, and which ones need an older student to watch you. The list updates by what your year and what you're covering in class. Just

tap it with your wand to find out what you are allowed to work on. If the list says you can't do something, don't try to do it."

Bryce paused to let that sink in. "Okay, library. Common sense rules. There isn't anything spectacular on the shelves—I've been to the Ravenclaw Commons once and they have a library that is almost as grand as the Hogwarts Library—but there are a lot of the more common reference materials you'll be needing, as well as the more commonly checked out materials. If you use something, put it back. There is also a separate exchange shelf. If you take a book from that shelf it's yours to keep, but you are expected to leave a book on the shelf in return for someone else.

"Announcements for clubs, Quidditch try-outs, and the like, will be posted on the bulletin board." He indicated a cork board next to the entrance passage. "Now, girl dorms are to the left, boys on the right, your dorm will have your year on it," Bryce gestured towards two more passages.

Harry and the other boys followed a corridor that spiraled to the right but didn't seem to change in elevation or cross on itself. Circular doors were set into the walls, each with a plaque listing not only the years, but the names of the residents. At the end of the corridor they found a door marked 'First Years'. Their room was, like apparently most everything in Hufflepuff, circular. There were five four-poster beds with thick black and yellow velvet hangings. Each had a trunk at its foot, a bedside cabinet with a big brass alarm clock, a wardrobe, and a chest of drawers. Above each of the nightstands was a small circular window, and a second door led to a bathroom.

Tired from the journey and meal each was barely able to pull on their pajamas and get into bed before falling asleep.

Chapter 7: Potion Man

"The chemists are a strange class of mortals, impelled by an almost insane impulse to seek their pleasures amid smoke and vapour, soot and flame, poisons and poverty; yet among all these evils I seem to live so sweetly that may I die if I were to change places with the Persian king."

-Johann Joachim Becher, *Physica subterranean* (1667)

Harry was awoken the next morning by Wayne Hopkins throwing a pillow at him. . "Wha' ya' do 'hat for?" he asked, in a very sleepy voice as he rubbed his bleary eyes.

"Practice," Wayne said. "Have to get ready for Quidditch, I'm a Chaser."

"First years aren't allowed to play on house teams," Ernie said from across the room.

"I know, that's why I'm starting training now," Wayne said. "Besides, don't you smell it?"

"Smell what?" Harry asked, pushing himself up and sniffing. He didn't smell anything.

Wayne grinned madly. "Breakfast."

The balled mass of covers and blankets that was curled up in the center of the bed to Harry's right twitched and a moment later Zevon Moon's head poked up like a periscope out of deep water. "Food?" he asked.

"Foood," Wayne repeated.

Zevon's sheets went flying every which way and there was a mad scramble for the door.

"I think I'm going to dislike mornings," Harry said, burrowing back under the covers.

The brass alarm clock went off.

"I hate mornings," he muttered darkly.

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Harry found a seat next to Justin at the Hufflepuff table with Ravenclaw and Slytherin behind him, and facing Gryffindor table where Ron Weasley had moved an entire serving platter in front of himself. Hermione had arrived with a rather large book and was studying it while eating her eggs, and Harry wondered when she'd had time to visit the library.

Harry turned in his seat to find that most of the Ravenclaws had brought reading material to breakfast, while the Slytherins seemed content to trade surly looks with each other and everyone else around them. After a moment he turned back to where Ron and Seamus were loudly arguing the merits of football versus quidditch and had managed to drag Justin and Ernie into what sounded like a cross-house debate on who'd win if West Ham were to go up against the Chudley Cannons. The current polls from the rest of Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables seemed to favor West Ham, no matter what game they were playing. At the same time as the sport-debate, Parvati and another girl seemed to be immersed in a conversation about some magazine that Harry had never heard of and had dragged in Megan Jones—a half blood—so that they had a third perspective.

Professor McGonagall came by with their class schedules and Harry examined his while digging into his breakfast. He quickly noticed that while some classes were single, others were double which meant that they lasted twice as long and were held with another house. Some classes (notably Astronomy and Potions) were only double classes, while History was the only class that did not have a double block. The rest seemed to be a mix of the two, having long double-classes in the morning, and shorter single-classes in the afternoon (save for when they were switched around with the long classes in the afternoon and the short ones in the morning) except for Astronomy which we held Thursday nights. They were paired with Gryffindor in Herbology and Slytherin for Charms and Astronomy. Double Potions, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Transfiguration sessions were held with the Ravenclaws.

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table again, but didn't see Allie. He had thought of inviting her over, but her absence conveniently decided him against it. He didn't know if it was against the rules or

not, but it didn't look like anyone else was sitting at another house's table and the sport debate and magazine discussion aside there were very few conversations going on between peoples of different houses. It didn't bode well for inter-house friendships, he thought, hoping he hadn't annoyed his new Headmaster only to find that he wouldn't be able to continue his friendship after all.

"We have double Transfiguration first," Hermione said loudly enough to be heard from the Gryffindor table. "I do hope you're all prepared. I picked up some books at the library..."

Harry double-checked his own class list, expecting to find Charms at the top.

It was.

It also wasn't until tomorrow as the first had fallen on a Saturday.

"When did you have time to go to the library?" Ron asked.

"Before breakfast, of course," Hermione said as Harry glanced back up from his schedule.

"Oh, of course," Ron said.

"Well, I'm going to go," Hermione said, packing up her book and stuffing it into an over-filled book bag. She staggered slightly as she hoisted it onto her back.

"Got enough books there?" Parvati asked.

"Well, I didn't know what classes we were going to have, now did I?" Hermione asked.

Harry snorted, a second year had been waiting in the common room to tell the first years that Charms was always the first class that first year Hufflepuffs had. It made sense that the Gryffindor first years always started with the same class as well. So why didn't the other first year know what her first class would be?

As it was, he had both the Book of Spells, Grade 1 and his Transfiguration book in his bag. They looked like the most exciting of his books and the weather looked nice, and he had been

anticipating exploring the grounds and maybe doing a little reading just to prepare for classes.

Parvati snagged the last sausage from the platter near her before Ron could get to it. "Do you even know how to get there?"

Hermione hesitated, "Do you?"

"Nope," Parvati said cheerfully. "It's why I'm not going now. Got a whole day to find it."

"But...classes, we don't want to be late," Hermione said, and Harry watched as she bit her lip and looked down the table. "Maybe we should ask a Prefect for—"

"Ask, shmask," Parvati waved it off. "We can find it perfectly well on our own."

"But..."

"You do realize we don't have any classes until tomorrow, don't you?" Parvati asked.

"We...oh," the other girl looked crestfallen. "Well, I suppose we can still find out where the classrooms are."

"Hey, Cedric?" Harry asked as he stood up

The fourth year glanced at him from up the table.

"How do you get to Transfiguration?" Harry asked.

"Huh, usually our firsties get Charms first," the older boy said.

"We do, but my friends have Transfiguration," Harry explained. "They want to find the classrooms for tomorrow."

Cedric glanced at the indicated Gryffindors, then shrugged and briefly described how to find the Transfiguration corridor. Hermione pulled out a fresh scroll of parchment and sat down to copy out a brief map.

Cedric grinned, "Don't put too much faith in maps. They aren't good for long. Hogwarts moves things around too much."

Hermione did not seem at all happy to find out that her map would quickly become useless. "Right then, let's go," she said briskly as she finished the map.

"Already?" Parvati asked.

"You wanted to spend the whole day searching for it," Hermione sniffed.

"Yeah, 'cause I thought I'd have some fun exploring while I searched," the other girl said.

"Fine, we'll go," Ron said loudly as he stood up. "Let's stop by the tower first though."

"What? Why?" Hermione asked.

"Well, we didn't know what classes we were going to have, now did we?" Parvati asked sweetly.

Hermione huffed, whirled around, and strode briskly from the hall.

"I don't think she likes you," Parvati told Ron.

"Me?" Ron asked. "What did I do?"

"We might have to rethink our study plans."

Harry turned to find Padma standing behind him and staring disapprovingly at the retreating Gryffindors.

"What do you mean?" He asked.

"Granger," she stated. "That girl already found the Library. When did she have time to do that?"

"This morning apparently," Harry said.

There was a howl of outrage, and the two turned to look at the Slytherin table. Everyone who had been seated there now had red and gold-

striped hair. Malfoy said something about looking like a weasel. Allie was there as well—though her empty plate suggested she had only just arrived. She twisted only lock of hair into a coil around a finger and peered at it closely for a moment, then gave the Weasley twins a distasteful glance, stood, and left the hall.

"How was your night?" Harry asked, turning back to Padma.

"Lovely," Padma said. "I have to find out if I can take my bed home with me. I've never had hangings before and my bed is so bouncy I bet I could clear ten feet if I got a good running start. Where are you heading for tomorrow morning?"

"Double Charms," Justin said.

"Padma, Justin Finch-Fletchey," Harry introduced them. "Justin, Padma Patil of Ravenclaw."

"Charmed," Justin grinned.

"Not for another day," Padma replied with a grin. "Do you have everything you need?"

"Yes, a second-year told us that first-year Hufflepuffs always have Charms as first class," Justin said.

"Really?" she cocked her head.

"You didn't grab every book and your potion supplies, did you?" Harry asked. "I grabbed Transfiguration and Charms in case I got a chance to do a little reading."

She shook her head, "Astronomy obviously has to be at night. I brought books for Defense, Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, and History."

"Not Potions?"

"Potions, right away in the morning?" Padma asked. "Nobody is that cruel."

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Cedric's map helped the first day, but by the second day the staircase that had taken Harry from the second floor up to the fifth instead let out in the dungeons, and going back down let out in the second right-hand side corridor on the third floor instead. Even when Hogwarts wasn't rearranging itself to some unspoken whim, finding classes was difficult. There were a hundred and forty two staircases in Hogwarts—by Harry's count at the end of his first week—some broad and sweeping, others narrow and rickety; some with only one landing, others with landings on several floors; some led to different places on Friday (or perhaps led to somewhere else the rest of the week and Friday was the one day it went where it should), some had steps that vanished half-way up that you had to skip over or be stuck in until someone helped you out. At least three of the staircases were 'one direction only' and you'd find yourself walking into a wall if you tried to go back up (or down) them, even if you were halfway between floors.

And after you were familiar with the stairs, Harry found, there were the doors. Doors that wouldn't open unless you asked politely or tickled them in the right places, and doors that you couldn't see at all because they were pretending to be walls. There were doors hidden behind paintings, at least two painting that were hidden behind doors, doors that required passwords and doors that wouldn't open until you answered a riddle or told it a joke, and some doors that weren't doors at all but walls that were pretending to be doors. Nothing in the castle stayed where it should, and it wasn't just the walls and stairs and corridors. The people in the paintings were constantly coming and going to visit friends, and Harry was certain that the suits of armor and statues could walk.

The ghosts weren't a help either. The Fat Friar was always happy to help a student find a class, but he was always describing yesterday's routes and they often didn't match up. Sir Nicholas, the Gryffindor Ghost, was more helpful but you had to tolerate his bemoaning of poorly trained headsmen and improperly sharpened axes unless you were in Gryffindor and had already heard all of his many speeches on the subjects. The Grey Lady of the Tower of Ivory and Silver (as Ravenclaw Tower was called by some) ignored pretty much everyone, and nobody, except maybe Allie, had the courage to ask the Bloody Baron for directions. Even worse than the frequently scary Slytherin ghost was Peeves the Poltergeist who was, as Eric Bryce had promised, worth two locked doors and a trick staircase if you met him when you were late for class.

Once you had learned to navigate Hogwarts' confusing internal geography, there was still the caretaker. Harry had only run into Mr. Filch and his scrawny cat Mrs. Norris once, but that once had been more than enough. He'd found himself in a warm, damp, and extremely cramped office, filled with a desk, two chairs (one of which was so uncomfortable Harry was sure it was charmed that way), and a seemingly endless number of filing cabinets. There was barely room enough to breathe, much less walk, and Harry had been subjected to Filch managing to do both while he reminisced of the Old Days when he was still allowed to torture the students while he showed off his collection of branding irons until the Fat Friar popped in through the floor—and Harry's legs—to tell the caretaker that Harry was needed in herbology.

And once you found them there were the classes themselves. Every Thursday at midnight the Hufflepuffs had to study the skies through their brass telescopes and memorize the stars and movements of planets. Herbology was taught three times a week by a dumpy little witch named Professor Sprout in a series of greenhouses behind the castle, and learned to take care of all manner of strange plants and fungi and what they could be used for.

History of Magic was easily the most boring class. In fact it was about as dull as anything dealing with magic could be. It was even duller than his fourth year primary teacher who never managed to speak above a soft drone. The Professor was a ghost, apparently the only one on Staff. Binns had taught History of Magic for as long as living memory could recall, then had died one day in the staff room and his spirit, trapped in the mind-numbing routine it had followed in life, had gotten up as a ghost and continued teaching it. It was possible, Harry thought, that one of the other ghosts could remember a time when someone else taught it, but it didn't seem likely. Rumor had it that he'd actually taught the four Founders history, and it was common belief that he saw anything that happened after 1576 was 'recent' and thus not worth talking about in class. Aside from the fact that the class was dreadfully boring Harry also noticed that, like his fourth-year primary teacher, Binns had a habit of talking in a dull monotone that was better at putting his students to sleep—or at least so the seventh years swore—than any sleeping potion. Those that managed to stay awake scrambled to scrawl down dates and names and got Magmog the Mostly Mad mixed up with Sogsag the Slightly Sane.

Charms was taught by a tiny little man called Professor Flitwick who had to stand on a pile of thick books to see over his desk. On the first day he started by taking roll, and when he got to Harry's name he gave an excited little squeak and toppled out of sight.

Harry quickly found his initial impression of McGonagall had been quite right. She wasn't a teacher to cross. Strict and clever she gave them a talking to the moment the bell rang. "Transfiguration is some of the most useful, complex, and dangerous, magic that you will learn in Hogwarts. Anyone messing about in my class will leave, and will not return."

Then she transfigured her desk into a pig and back. They were all very impressed and couldn't wait to get started, but it quickly became apparent that they wouldn't be changing furniture into animals anytime soon. A long series of complicated-looking notes followed, but unlike in Binns' class Harry had no problems staying awake and copying them down. Then matches were passed about and they were set to transfiguring them into needles.

By the end of the lesson several people had managed to make their matches pointy. Harry hadn't, but his had taken on a silvery color. Only Padma managed to do both but it lacked an eye for thread. McGonagall gave her a rare smile as she showed it to the class.

Friday was a big day for Harry. It was the first day that he and his dorm-mates had managed to find their way down to breakfast without getting lost or having to ask for directions. He wasn't particularly surprised to find Allie already sitting at the Hufflepuff table. Several of the other Hufflepuff's had looked askance at her presence, but when Harry made it clear she was his friend, and that she wasn't going to cause any trouble, they'd shrugged their shoulders and more or less accepted that she'd join them for breakfast. Privately Harry was grateful she did otherwise he'd have hardly had a chance to see her outside of Charms.

They were just sitting down to breakfast when conversation in the Hall stopped. The castle held its breath as the Slytherins came in and sat down in one solid block. There had been a number of practical jokes already, and while the initial blitz seemed to target students almost at random, for the last two days Slytherin house had bore the brunt of the pranks. Two days before they had come in with

their robes glowing an eye-watering bright pink striped with a dull pea green, and yesterday they'd sat down for breakfast only to spend the rest of the day talking, and taking notes, backwards. That had actually been dangerous as spells came out backwards as well and a number of sixth years had to go to the hospital wings after a weather moderating charm instead summoned a miniature tornado that had ransacked half of the Charms corridor and caused classes to be delayed all afternoon. After a moment when nothing happened, Hogwarts seemed to sigh and noise in the Great Hall returned as the other students resumed conversations.

Harry was just turning to ask Allie how things were going in Slytherin when someone shouted from behind him: "Stay away from him you slimy Snake!"

Harry turned, curious to see who had gotten upset and about what, to find Ron standing behind him. The other boy's ears were tinged pink, and his hands were balled into fists.

"I beg your pardon?" Allie asked in an icy voice.

"What's going on, Ron?" he asked, only for Ron to ignore him and continue shouting at Allie.

"You heard me, this is your fault," Ron said. "You're trying to kill Harry."

"She's what?" Harry asked, totally bewildered.

"She's a no-good slimy snake, Harry," Ron said, finally turning to him. "If she'd been sitting by you in Charms and she'd done that to you..."

Harry winced at the memory of his first, and rather...spectacular, Double Charms lesson. After Flitwick had taken the roll he'd given a complex series of notes and sent them to practicing conjuring sparks from their wands. Allie had not succeeded in getting her wand to send up sparks. She had, however, conjured a wash of lurid purple flames that quickly reduced her desk to ash and burned a seven inch-deep, perfectly circular, hole in the floor before Professor Flitwick had been able to extinguish it.

He saw Ernie and Justin watching, the former with his wand out and resting on the table, and shook his head. The last thing Harry wanted to was drag his house and dorm-mates into the inter-house feud that Ron seemed eager to continue for another generation. Cedric gave him a pointed look, but after a firm nod the unofficial advisor to the first-year boys shrugged and turned back to his breakfast.

"Let me get this straight," Allie was saying to Ron as Harry turned back to his friends. "You're suggesting that I tried to kill Harry in class, during the first lesson on the very first day of school, right in front of the Charms Professor, who, I should add, was a world-class duelist when he was younger, with some piece of dark magic that was aimed at him? But," she continued, "I was so incompetent, that instead of attacking Harry, who was seated on the other side of the room, I burned down my desk instead?"

"You weren't there, Ron," Harry said as the tips of his friend's ears turned pink. "It wasn't like that. It was an accident."

"Oh yeah?" Ron asked. "No ordinary magic can make stone burn, Harry. That's powerful Dark Magic, that is." He turned back to Allie. "Good plan, too, get into class with him. I bet you know all kinds of Dark Magic. All that special studying you say you did."

"Weasley," Allie said softly as she smirked at him. "If I'd studied half the Dark Magic that you seem to think I studied, were I in your place, I'd be very careful about irritating me."

"Don't threaten our brother," one of the Weasley twins said, suddenly appearing at Ron's sides as they sprang to his defense.

"Yeah, only we get to torture him," the other said.

"Oh please," Parvati said. "Allie wasn't threatening him. She just pointed out that if Ron's assumptions about what types of magic she'd studied were correct he should show a little care in how he addresses her. I mean, you're accusing someone of studying and using the Dark Arts to her face, that's not exactly something conducive to a long and healthy life."

"Wow," her sister said, moving in from Ravenclaw.

"What?" Parvati said.

"You used 'conducive' in a sentence," Padma said. "That's not all your brother did," she said, turning to Fred and George as Parvati huffed, crossed her arms, and glared at her. "He accused her of using the Dark Arts openly, and ineptly, in front of a teacher of Professor Flitwick's quality, and he did it to her face. I know Gryffindors aren't known for their intellects, and are known for shooting their mouths off without thinking, but even for your house that displays an amazing lack of sense."

The Weasley twins frowned. "She has a point, Ron," one said.

"Snape likes her, what other proof do you need?" Ron demanded.

Harry hadn't had Potions yet, but if even half the stories he'd heard were true he wasn't looking forward to it.

"Ickle Ronnikins has a point too, oh Brother o' Mine," the other said.

"True, very true," the first agreed.

"Professor Snape isn't nearly as bad as you give him credit for being," Allie crossed his arms.

"He gave you points for messing with Neville's potion," Ron accused.

"I gave Ms. Blackthorn points, Mr. Weasley," Snape said silkily from behind the youngest Weasley present, "because she kept Mr. Longbottom's potion from melting his cauldron and dousing half the class with a solution that would have melted the lab tables—thus incurring expensive damage to school property—and raised boils on anyone it touched. Her quick thinking, reaction, and knowledge of the few, simple, extremely...basic instructions that I gave, merited rewarding."

Ron's face had twisted up, first in shock, then in horror as Snape spoke in a voice so soft that conversation around them stilled and the students strained to catch each word.

"Your...ineptitude," Snape went on, "in letting your partner add porcupine quills to the potion while it was still on the fire, and thus putting the entire class at risk, merited much more than the few

points I deducted from you. Especially since Ms. Granger," he turned and affixed his gaze on the other first-year Gryffindor who sat frozen like a deer in the headlamps of a car, "Was telling you what to do instead of paying attention to her own work like she was supposed to."

Snape surveyed them all. "I do believe the Ravenclaw table is over there, Ms. Patil."

"Just talking to my sister, sir," Padma said.

Snape's mouth tightened and he flicked his gaze onto Allie. "And your reason, Ms. Blackthorn?"

"I figured this conclave of the student body had to have at least one Slytherin representative," Allie said.

Snape didn't say anything for a moment. "You have five minutes, Ms. Blackthorn, or I shall be forced to take points from my own house. Ms. Patil, the same." He turned and stalked off, his cloak flapping out behind him like bat wings.

Ron glared at Allie again, then he and his brothers stalked back to their table.

"Do you know why Ron doesn't like you?" Harry asked Allie.

Allie shook her head, "I don't know. Most of the name-calling seems centered on the fact that I'm in Slytherin. I've heard some talk in the Slytherin Common Room, about how the other houses and the professors are out to get us, but frankly I don't give it much credit."

"Oh," Harry said, turning back to his breakfast. He was just smearing marmalade onto toast when Hedwig appeared and dropped a letter in front of him. She had turned up with the other post owls at breakfast before to nibble on Harry's ear and nick a bit of toast before flying back to the owlery, but this was the first time she'd brought Harry anything. He took the note from her leg and gave her a piece of bacon to eat while he read the course scrawl that invited him to Hagrid's hut for tea at three.

He borrowed a quill from Hannah to jot down yes, please, see you later, and sent it off with Hedwig to return to Hagrid. He hoped that

Professor Snape would go easier on them than he had appeared to go on the Gryffindors, and Cedric had told them that Professor Snape saved most of his animosity for the lion house so he had some hope. Still...the man had looked distinctly displeased to see Harry at the start-of-term banquet. So with much trepidation, Harry finished breakfast and set out in search of the Potion's classroom.

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The potion's classroom was on the first level of the dungeons. Harry knew this because he'd traveled through no less than three levels of dungeons to find the place and he'd seen a stairway leading down to a fourth level of dungeons. It was cold, and would have been creepy enough on its own, but shelves lined each wall, filled with jars of various creatures and... things, twisted and grotesque, floating in fluids ranging from clear and colorless, to poisonous green, to something that was unappealing shade of vomit-inducing pink and so thick you couldn't see what it preserved. There were the expected snakes and fetal pigs, and small furry animals, and quite a few that were not furry and only questionably animal, and several looked like malformed human babies.

Harry was just examining something green and squirming in a bottle of what looked like water mixed with a little rancid milk, when someone tapped his arm. He jumped, grasping for his wand and found Padma standing behind him with an amused expression on her face.

"Jumpy?"

Harry gestured at the bottle he'd been looking at and Padma's nose wrinkled. "I'm sure it's used for something," she said though she didn't sound too sure of herself.

"Besides scaring students?" he asked.

She nodded, and indicated another jar, "Poisoned dragon's liver... Do you think they poison the whole dragon, or just the liver?"

"Both?" Harry suggested weakly. "Hagrid invited me to tea at three...want to come?"

Padma nodded, "Parvati has class free as well, would you mind if I—"

"No, not at all," Harry said. "She's my friend too, you know. What about Allie?"

"If you see her," Padma said, moving to an open lab bench and began unpacking her potion things. "I have no idea where the Slytherins live."

"Somewhere in the dungeons and under the lake, I was told," Harry said. "Would you mind working together?"

"No, not at all," Padma said, grinning at him.

Then Professor Snape entered the classroom with his robes whirling about him and things became quite a bit worse. Harry had suspected at the feast that Professor Snape disliked him. He was wrong. Professor Snape did not dislike him—he out-right loathed him. Whatever it was that had made him courteous, if abrupt, in Diagon Alley was absent, and his being in Hufflepuff instead of Gryffindor didn't seem to have any kind of moderating influence, or, if it did, Harry didn't want to imagine what it'd be like if he had been sorted into Gryffindor.

Like Flitwick Professor Snape started by taking roll. When he got to Harry he paused and looked at Harry with black eyes; cold and empty and vaguely reptilian. "Ah yes, Harry Potter, our new...celebrity."

There were titters from most of the Ravenclaws in the classroom. Padma frowned at Snape, only to give a little jump when he looked up directly at her. His eyes were black, like Hagrid's and Allie's, but they lacked any of Hagrid's warmth or Allie's sarcastic, often irreverent, humor. They reminded Harry of the eyes of the lizards he'd seen in the reptile house at the zoo and of long, dark tunnels that had no exit.

He finished taking roll and then gave his students a look that left them feeling like they'd been examined and, at least in the case of the Hufflepuffs, had been found wanting. Harry got the feeling that the Ravenclaws were, at best, something that the Potions Master had learned to tolerate. "I am here to teach you the exact art and

subtle science of potion-brewing," he said. Like McGonagall he had a flare for keeping his students' attention with very little effort. Unlike her, Harry thought, his words had softly stressed sibilants.

"As there is very little wand-waving foolishness in this class, many of you will hardly consider this magic. I don't expect that you will understand the beauty of a softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, and ensnaring the senses... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death—if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

More silence. Harry and Ernie—who was seated at the next bench over—exchanged looks. Padma sat at the edge of her desk, eager to prove that she wasn't a dunderhead. Most of the rest of the Ravenclaws look similarly ready, though one or two seemed bored with the overly-dramatic monolog.

"Potter."

Harry jerked his head back to Professor Snape.

"What would I get, Potter," Snape hissed, "If I were to aid the powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Padma's hand shot and out of the corner of his eye Harry saw Ernie roll his eyes at the girl. "I don't know," he said, then added, "sir."

Snape's brow furled slightly and his lips twitched but not enough to relieve the dark scowl he directed at Harry. "Tut, tut," he said tonelessly. "Clearly, fame is not everything."

"Let us try again, Potter. Where would you look if I were to instruct you to look for a bezoar?"

Padma's hand stayed stretched as high as she could reach without leaving her chair for orbit, and it was joined by the hands of several other Ravenclaws, but she made a slight pointing gesture towards a door in one wall with her other hand.

Not an office since Snape had come from a third door and the first had led to the hall so... "The supply closet, sir?" he asked.

"Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming, eh, Potter?" Snape sneered, "A point from Hufflepuff for cheek." Still ignoring Padma's quivering hand he asked in a silky voice, "What, Potter, is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

At this Padma's hand wavered, started to rise again, and ended up hovering somewhere just over her head as she bit her lip in serious thought.

"I don't know, Sir, but I think Padma might; why don't you ask her?"

A few people laughed.

Snape glared at Padma whose arm sank abruptly to the desk.

"Thanks a lot, Harry," Padma muttered.

Snape turned back to Harry, "For your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood result in a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone, taken from the stomach of a ruminant, most commonly a goat, that will save you from most poisons. And monkshood and wolfsbane are common names for the plant also known as aconite. Well? Why aren't you copying this down?"

There was a sudden rush for parchment and quills and over the sound Snape's voice said, "Another point for cheek, Potter. Your bezoar answer was impertinent, but I do keep a number of bezoars in the supply closet because my idiot students seem to enjoy poisoning themselves."

He paused and the room was filled once more with silence. "I only place orders for bezoars before the school year begins. It would be a...pity were they to run out before I could restock and someone was in need of one."

Harry got the impression that if such were to happen Snape would instead declare a school party.

Then Snape tapped his wand on a blackboard and instructions for a boil-relieving potion appeared, and set them to work in pairs.

Things did not improve for Hufflepuff after that. Snape ignored the Ravenclaws, mostly, but he spared no effort to criticize the Hufflepuff first years as he swept around the room in his long black cloak. He'd disappear into shadows only to suddenly loom over a steaming cauldron to say "Much too hot, Bones", or "You are supposed to crush the snake fangs, Macmillan, not grind them".

Despite this and the points Snape had already taken, the class seemed to be survivable. Harry felt something warm against his chest as he finished stewing his horned slugs. He rubbed his robes and found a damp spot, likely from some splashed potion. A moment later there was a loud hissing like cold water being poured onto a hot griddle. Harry and Padma turned as gouts of acid green smoke billowed up from Wayne Hopkins and Megan Jones' cauldron which had melted into a pewter puddle. The potion had splattered across the pair, as well as Ernie, and the fifth boy in Harry's dorm, Zacharias Smith, raising great red boils wherever it touched.

"Idiot boy!" snarled Snape as the potion melted through the bench. There was a sharp clang as the blob of former cauldron hit the stone floor, and the potion hissed as it burned the legs of lab stools and holes in peoples' shoes. "I suppose you forgot to take the potion off the fire before adding the porcupine quills," he added, indifferent to Megan who had collapsed and was moaning in pain after being drenched in the failed potion, while he vanished the remnants of the potion with his wand.

Snape turned from them to glare about the room. "You—Potter—why didn't you tell them not to add the quills? I know for a fact that Ms. Blackthorn told you about that particular misstep at breakfast. Thought it'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another point you've lost for Hufflepuff."

Harry started to argue, but Padma put a hand on his arm and pulled him back. "Don't push it; I heard Snape can turn very nasty."

Harry scowled, but backed down.

Snape sneered at him, then turned back to Wayne. "What are you waiting for, an ad in the Daily Prophet?" he asked, gesturing at Megan. "Take her up to the hospital wing."

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At five minutes to three Harry was standing in the Entrance Hall waiting for the twins. Padma arrived at almost the same time he did, but it was almost three by the time Parvati showed up, out of breath and with Ron in tow.

"He wanted to come to," she explained.

Harry shrugged in response.

"Snape took seven points off him," Padma told her sister.

"Really?" Ron asked, "What'd you do?"

Padma shot the youngest Weasley brother a disgusted look.

Ron flinched and took a step back, "I mean, uh, cheer up, Snape's always taking loads of points off of Fred and George."

Harry didn't reply as they set off across the grounds.

Hagrid lived in a small stone hut with a thatched roof at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Next to the front door were a pair of galoshes, and either a small arbalest or a very large crossbow sat next to them. There was an empty paddock a short ways off, and a large garden complete with obligatory pumpkin patch and magically animated scare-crow that curved around one side from the back.

Cheerful puffs of smoke were coming from a crooked pipe at the top of the house when they arrived. Harry knocked on the door, and there was a frantic scrabbling inside punctuated by several booming barks.

"Back, Fang—back."

The door cracked open and Hagrid's big, hairy face appeared. "Hang on a mo'," he said. "Back, Fang." He let them in, struggling to keep a hold on the collar of an enormous black boarhound.

The hut held a single, circular room. Hams, pheasants, onions, and drying herbs hung from the rafters. A copper kettle was boiling on an open fire, next to a happily bubbling black cauldron. Next to one wall was a bed larger than three of the dormitory four-posters pushed

together, over which was thrown a patchwork quilt. There was an oversized set of table and chairs, with a similarly large teapot and tankard-sized teacups.

"Make yerselves at home," Hagrid said, turning to check the kettle and letting go of Fang.

Parvati and Padma squealed as the boarhound managed two bounding steps before jumping on Ron. Ron disappeared somewhere beneath the large dog, which promptly began licking his ears.

"Geroff, geroff!"

"This is Ron," Harry told Hagrid, who was pouring boiling water into the teapot.

"No, tha's Fang," Hagrid said. He paused, "Fang?" he reached down and caught up the boarhound by the collar and pulled him back. "Another Weasley, eh? I spent half me life chasin' yer twin brothers away from the forest. What're yeh doin' on the floor?"

Padma and Parvati giggled as Harry helped Ron to his feet.

"And these are Padma and Parvati," Harry said. "But you've already met."

"So I 'ave," Hagrid said. "Let me set out some more rock cakes."

The rock cakes lived up to their name. At first Harry thought that Hagrid had made a mistake and set out actual rocks, but then Ron found a raisin that he swore broke his tooth. The tea was strong but Harry discovered it wasn't nearly as bad as the rock cakes, though all of them turned down Hagrid's offer of hippogriff milk. They pretended to enjoy the cakes while the four told Hagrid about their first lessons. Fang rested his head on Harry's knee and drooled all over his robes while he crunched rock cakes that Harry slipped him.

Ron complained about his first lesson with Snape, where the Potion's Master had taken three points from Gryffindor between "Granger being a know-it-all" and Ron's "failure to point out the dangers of porcupine quills added to a cauldron still on the fire".

"It's a good thing Allie caught that, then," Padma said. "Zacharias Smith made the same mistake and Snape took points from Harry for it even though Smith was sitting two benches behind Harry. The cauldron melted, splashed potion everywhere. It burned clear through the potion bench and a couple of people got really nasty boils from it. Megan Jones had to be taken to the hospital wing. But he really seemed to have it in for Harry."

"Professor Snape don' really like any o' his students," Hagrid said.

"Maybe, but he really seemed to hate me."

"Rubbish!" said Hagrid. "Why would he?" he asked, not really meeting Harry's eyes and turned to Ron. "How's your brother Charlie? I liked him a lot—great with animals."

Harry wondered if Hagrid had changed the subject on purpose. While Ron told Hagrid all about Charlie's work with dragons Harry picked up a piece of paper that was lying on the table under the tea cozy. It was a cutting from the Daily Prophet.

"What do you have there?" Ron asked.

"An article about that break-in at Gringotts," Harry said as he read the clipping. "Padma, Parvati, this was the same day we were there."

"What's it say?" Parvati demanded.

"Just that the vault that was broken into had been emptied earlier that same day," Harry said. "This could have been happening while we were there."

"Does it say what was in the vault?" Ron asked.

"Just that it was emptied," Harry frowned. Important business, needs me ter clear ou' a Gringott's vault fer 'im. He looked up at Hagrid who was pouring more tea and avoiding Harry's gaze. Could it have been that whatever Hagrid had gone to retrieve had been in the vault that had been broken into?

As they trudged back to the castle, their pockets weighed down with rock cakes they had been too polite to refuse, this question was

joined in Harry's mind by others. Had Hagrid collected the package just in time? Where was it now? And did Hagrid know something about Snape that he didn't want to tell Harry?

Chapter 8: Consequences and Rule-Breaking

"If you obey all the rules you miss all the fun."

Katharine Hepburn

So that was it. Harry wondered dejectedly what they were going to tell the school when he disappeared. Harry Potter was expelled for trying to do the right thing, probably, or something similar at least. He wasn't certain how Neville's remembrall had ended up on the grass, but it probably had something to do with that accident that Ron had been talking about. Well, actually he had talked mostly about the fight after Madam Hooch had dragged the injured Neville away and the points Professor McGonagall had taken from Gryffindor. Between that and the deductions from Professor Snape he hadn't broken the record for most points taken during the first month at Hogwarts—currently his brothers were co-holders of that particular record—but he was well on his way to getting there.

But then Stephen Cornfoot...

Harry shook his head. If there was one type of person he detested it was a bully, and he'd lived with the rumors that Dudley had spread long enough to realize that those who bullied someone behind their backs were even crueler than those who did it to their face. Trying to back Cornfoot down after he'd found the magical device and threatened to smash it was a matter of...principal. Harry toyed with the word in his mind for a moment, his Horoscope-of-the-day said he shouldn't let go of them and he wondered if this was what it had meant.

It was as good a word as any, he decided with a shrug, though he probably could have handled the situation better. How, exactly, he wasn't certain. Calm hadn't achieved anything, nor had polite, but they hadn't exactly worsened it. That hadn't happened until Justin and Ernie had stepped up with the rest of his house-mates a step behind. But how it had gone from Stephen threatening to smash it to Morag throwing it into the air for them to catch as a demonstration of broom skills while Madam Hooch escorted Sally-Anne to the hospital wing, Harry had no idea.

He'd won, scraping his knuckles on the side of the castle as he got between it and the remembrall. His entire left side felt like one massive bruise where he'd slammed sideways into the stone when

the braking charms didn't slow him down fast enough. It could have been worse. If Professor Sprout hadn't come out right then and put a cushioning charm on the ground after he lost control following his collision with the school...

Justin had probably had the right of it. Brooms were bloody dangerous things to be flying around on.

Harry shook himself from his musings as Professor Sprout turned and started up a staircase that, being Tuesday afternoon, led to the transfiguration wing.

It really was the perfect end for the thoroughly horrible day he had been having.

He had been looking forward to his first broom-flying lesson ever since Bryce had told the first years that lessons usually started up in the second week to give everyone a chance to acclimate to the school. But Professor McGonagall had assigned them a foot-long essay the day before, and Professor Flitwick had set them to practicing common wand movements (and the less said about Professor Snape's schoolwork the better). Allie had apparently come down with something and had looked absolutely miserable the few times he'd seen her in the halls between classes, and Ron had stopped talking to him because of his friendship with 'that slimy snake.' And then, once they had gotten out of the classes, they found the weather had settled into the kind of oppressive grey overcast that said 'I really need to rain' but didn't, and instead made everything cold and clammy and miserable.

Harry started to ask where they were going, but was stopped as Professor Sprout suddenly turned on him.

"Do you have any idea how incredibly foolish that was?" the short witch demanded. "Of all the insane, reckless, dangerous things you could have done..." she turned and continued up the stairs. "You've never been on a broom before today?"

"Not that I can remember, Professor," Harry said.

"Hmm..."

They stopped before the Advanced Transfiguration classroom and Professor Sprout knocked on the door.

The door swung open and she popped her head in, "Mind if I borrow Ms. Capper for a moment Professor McGonagall?"

Apparently Professor McGonagall didn't mind because a moment later an older girl Harry vaguely recognized from the common room came out. She was a little taller than Professor Sprout with a solid frame, a square jaw, blond hair, and a nose that was crooked from being broken on more than one occasion. She reminded Harry of a friendlier version of one of his Aunt Margie's bulldogs.

"Professor Sprout, what's going on?" she asked with some surprise. She glanced down at Harry, then back up at her Head of House. "It's N.E.W.T. year and you know I—"

"How do you feel about winning the Quidditch Cup?" Professor Sprout asked, uncharacteristically interrupting.

The girl frowned, "We're rebuilding this year, Professor. I'm hoping to leave the team in good position for next year...why?"

Professor Sprout didn't reply, just got very bubbly as she headed down the corridor. Five minutes later they poked their heads into the Hufflepuff common room.

"Diggory, we need you outside," Sprout said.

Harry followed the older students and his Professor up to the entrance hall and out onto the grounds.

"I've found you a replacement Seeker," Professor Sprout said abruptly.

"A what?" Harry asked.

"Did you really?" Cedric asked, giving Harry a curious look.

"He's got the build for it," the girl said after a moment.

"So does any first year, for that matter so do most second years," Cedric said, "unlike myself," He half-waved towards himself. He was

taller than Harry by a not inconsiderable amount, and his broad shoulders hinted at the build he had yet to fully grow into.

"Can someone please explain to me what you are talking about?" Harry asked. "Am I not being expelled?"

"Expelled?" the girl asked.

Harry crossed his arm, "Yeah, I got on the broom when I wasn't supposed to, okay? No need to mock me."

"Nobody's mocking you, Harry," Professor Sprout said soothingly. "I'd like you to consider being on the Hufflepuff Quidditch Team. It'd be a tremendous amount of work, that's why first years normally aren't allowed to be on the team, but it seems as though you have the knack for it."

"What exactly did he do?" the girl asked.

Sprout took out the remembrall. "He caught this in his hand after a fifty-foot dive—Charlie Weasley couldn't have made that catch—on his first time up on a broom."

The girl looked intrigued while the boy took the remembrall and tossed it lightly in the air before catching it again.

"Be careful with that," Harry said. "It belongs to a friend."

"Who?" Sprout asked.

"Neville Longbottom, he's in Gryffindor," Harry said as the girl passed it to Cedric. "See? His name's inscribed on it. It must have fallen out of his pocket when he had broom lessons."

"Hmm," Cedric considered it, then handed it to Harry who put it carefully in his pocket. "It's larger than a snitch, easier to spot too."

"What's a 'snitch'?" Harry asked.

"Have you ever seen a game of Quidditch?" the girl asked.

Harry shook his head, "Ron tried to explain it on the train, but..." he shrugged.

"The basics are easy enough," the girl said. "It's a game, played on brooms, by two teams of seven people. Three people, chasers, try to throw one ball through one of three identical hoops on their opponents' side of the field. Each team has one person, a keeper, who tries to keep that from happening."

Harry nodded.

"Each team also gets two beaters who each have a bat. There are two more balls that are charmed to fly around randomly and try to knock people off their brooms. The beaters try to protect their team's players while sending those balls after the players on the other team."

"And the last person?"

"The last person is the seeker," she said. "His primary duty is to catch the last ball, the golden snitch. It's about the size of a walnut, wicked fast, and darn near impossible to spot. The game ends when the snitch is caught, and that team gets one hundred and fifty points."

Harry frowned, "That many points seems unbalancing."

"It can be," Cedric shrugged. "But there are a lot of teams that only win, and then by very small amounts, because their seeker catches the snitch—and I've been to games where one side wins even when the other team gets it. But really, wins doesn't factor into standings. Games are played in series. The number of points picked up in a series determines overall standings. There was one season ten or twelve years ago, I think, where Ravenclaw lost all of its games but took the Quidditch cup because its combined point total was more than that of any of the other House Teams."

Harry looked at Professor Sprout, "And you want me to play?"

Professor Sprout nodded, "I think you'd do very well."

Harry frowned, "I bet there are a lot of people loads better than me."

"Decent seekers are a sickle a score," the girl said. "Great ones...those are harder to come by." She offered her hand, "Samothrace Capper, Quidditch Captain. Call me Thrace."

Harry shook it.

"This is Cedric Diggory," Thrace said. "He used to have your job."

"He did?" Harry asked, confused. "But I don't want, I mean," he turned to Cedric. "You can keep it...if you want to."

"That's the point, Harry," Cedric smiled. "I don't. I'm good on a broom, Harry, but—"

"But Ced's too modest," Thrace rolled her eyes. "He's probably one of the top three flyers in the school. The problem is that his best position is chaser and before now we just didn't have anyone else who could play seeker reasonably well. If you're even half as good as Professor Sprout thinks it means I can move Cedric back to Chaser and reshuffle our entire lineup."

"Move Scott to reserves?" Cedric asked.

She nodded. "He needs another year of seasoning and that way he can be slotted in as one of the Chasers next year after Tonks and I graduate." Thrace turned to Sprout. "Well have to find a good broom for him, Professor, Merlin knows the school brooms are useless. I'm tempted to go for a late-model Nimbus."

"You'd over-broom him with something like that," Cedric said with a frown.

"Over-broom?" Harry asked.

"How much do you know about brooms?" Sam asked.

"They fly?" Harry asked.

Cedric chuckled. "It goes like this, Harry. Brooms are heavily enchanted to fly. Some brooms have more, or better, or more complex enchantments—the three aren't exactly the same—than others. Some have a higher top speed, others accelerate faster, and still others are more maneuverable. There is a tendency to look

simply at those statistics when determining what broom is 'best'. In that sense over-brooming is when you put a flyer on a broom that is too powerful for their experience and ability, okay?"

"Makes sense," Harry said. "It means that they'll have accidents that more experienced fliers won't, right?"

"And that they can't get the full performance out of the broom," Thrace added. "However, there is another aspect to brooms that most wizards and witches overlook. The slump."

"The slump?" Harry asked.

"The slump is...complex," Cedric said. "It's even debated on whether it's real or something that only exists in the minds of Quidditch players and professional broom racers. You see brooms are sort of like wands. They don't 'choose a wizard'—to use Olivander's expression—but a broom that is ridden by a single wizard becomes more...attuned to that wizard. That connection between broom and rider is what we call the slump. The deeper the slump, the more attuned the broom is.

"You rode one of the school brooms, right? How did it feel?"

Harry frowned, "like I was riding a broom."

Cedric and Thrace laughed and Professor Sprout smiled.

"A good broom feels like an extension of your being," Thrace said enthusiastically. "One of the reasons why the school brooms are so bad isn't because they're old, it's because they've had so many riders that they're senile. The problem with some of the later high-end brooms is that the slump is so deep that you might be able to get the full technical performance out of the broom, but it'll be the broom doing most of the work so you don't really get any better as a flyer."

"And the better I am as a flyer the...more I can get out of a broom, no matter what its...technical abilities are?" Harry asked carefully.

"Exactly," Cedric said. "I've seen some Quidditch players get well beyond what their broom's specified capabilities were supposed to be simply because they were excellent flyers and their brooms were

highly attuned to them. There is a hard limit on what any given model of broom can do that even the best flyer can't get past, but it shouldn't be a problem for you any time soon if you haven't flown before."

"So ideally I need a broom with fairly good technical abilities and not a lot of...slump," Harry said.

"By Merlin, I think he's got it," Thrace said.

"What will happen if I do get one with a lot of slump?" Harry asked. "It'd pick up on my bad habits?"

"Not as such," Cedric said. "What would happen would be the broom doing more of the work so you wouldn't really be improving as a flier."

"Ah," Harry said. "So what kind of broom would you recommend?"

"Mid-range Cleansweep?" Sprout asked Thrace. "Maybe a five or six?"

"Six," Thrace said with a shake of her head. "The five is more of a beater/keeper broom, stable and maneuverable, but the acceleration rate drops off fast after the initial burst. Maybe a Comet deuce-sixty, that's what the Claw's new reserve seeker is using."

"I will talk to Professor Dumbledore and see if we can't bend the first-year rule. Merlin knows we need a better team than last year, rebuilding year or no. Flattened in that last match against Slytherin, I couldn't look at Severus for weeks...not that Minerva's lions did any better."

Professor Sprout gave Harry a stern look that was mostly ruined by a broad, dirt-smudged smile. "I want to hear that you're training hard, Harry, or I may change my mind about punishing you."

She turned and started to head down the hall with a little skip in her step, only to stop suddenly and turn back. "Your father would have been proud," she said. "He was quite the Quidditch player himself." She turned and continued down the hall, humming a bubbly little tune.

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"You're joking," Ernie Macmillan said.

It was dinnertime and Harry had just finished explaining to his housemates what had happened after he'd left the grounds with Professor Sprout. Ernie had a piece of steak and kidney pie halfway to his mouth, but had completely forgotten about it.

"Seeker?" Justin asked, "What's that?"

"Seeker?" Ernie repeated his friend's question while Susan Bones tried to explain Quidditch to the muggle-born Justin. "But first years are never allowed—you must be the youngest house player in about—"

"—a century," Harry finished. "Thrace told me." It felt a bit unusual calling someone so much older by their first name, but it was apparently the custom to do so in Hufflepuff, at least amongst themselves. The single exception seemed to be one seventh year that Cedric had introduced a 'Tonks' who was also on the team as one of the Chasers. On meeting Harry she had said 'Wotcher', shook his hand, and then threatened grievous bodily harm if she ever heard him mention her first name.

"When do you start training?" Wayne asked.

"Next week," Harry replied, "Only don't tell anyone. Thrace has completely shuffled the lineup and wants to keep it, and me, secret."

The others traded dark looks.

"Hufflepuff hasn't won the Quidditch cup in ages," Ernie said.

"Sixty-eight years," Susan chipped in. "My Aunt was on the team. She said the only reason they took the cup was because the Gryffindor Team came down with scfungulus and had to be quarantined during one of their matches, and Slytherin forfeited a match when an accident in potions caused half the team to start laughing like a pack of hyenas.

"And historically-speaking, if you get the Quidditch cup you have a better than even chance of getting the House Trophy. Can anyone think of when Hufflepuff last had that trophy?"

Harry traded blank looks with the others at the table but most of them shook their heads.

"It's been ages, I know that much," Ernie said. "A century, maybe more?"

"More," Allie said from behind him. "Can you move over so I can sit with my friend?"

Ernie frowned at her, but he moved his place setting over. "How much do you know?" he asked suspiciously.

"How much do I know about what?" she returned blandly before turning to Harry. "So, I hear congratulations are in order."

"Thanks," Harry said, shaking the proffered hand. "So, er, you do know about...well, what happened?"

"Not everything, of course," Allie said. "Hogwarts has a fast rumor mill but it isn't quite that fast and Hufflepuff has done a fair job keeping the news in-house, so to speak. Besides," she grinned suddenly, "Unlike what some people seem to think—" she gave a pointed look over to where Ron was sitting at the Gryffindor table "—I'm hardly running a spy ring to gather Quidditch secrets." She paused for a moment, then shrugged, "Not that there's been enough time to establish much of a network if I was."

"Then how do you know about Harry?" Ernie asked.

Allie didn't reply.

"Please?" Harry asked. "If the secret gets out..."

"It'll hardly be the end of the world," she observed dryly. "But since you asked, Harry, it wasn't any one thing. Professor Sprout was seen dancing in her greenhouses, your Captain has suddenly booked the Quidditch pitch solid through for the next week, Cedric Diggory checked out all of the books on brooms and broom catalogs

even though according to Marcus Flint—who is captain of the Slytherin team—he just got a new broom last year."

She grabbed a plate and helped herself to some mashed potatoes, to which she added a very generous blob of butter. "Professor Sprout wasn't exactly subtle about it either, pulling two students out of class like that while not even taking points from you. You really should have seen about getting assigned a detention or something, although watching Draco froth at you getting away with rule-breaking is really quite amusing."

Harry traded looks with Justin and Susan while Allie sampled the potatoes. Justin gave a short shrug, as though to as 'what do you want us to do?' while Susan just gave him a grim look.

"Oh relax," Allie said with a grin. "I keep other peoples' secrets like I keep my own...as long as those I trust with them keep them in return." She gestured broadly with a fork covered in potato that was gilded with butter, "It's a bit late to get yourself a detention, you might want to tell Capper to do something about those pitch reservations though."

"Shouldn't you be off crawling around with the rest of the snake pit?" one boy in Harry's dorm asked from further down the table.

"Zacharias Smith, blunt and rude," Allie said coolly. "Your reputation precedes you."

Zach flushed.

"You know each other?" Harry asked curiously.

"I know of him," Allie corrected with a shrug, "but then, I know of a lot of people. Why don't you introduce me to your friends?"

"Okay," Harry said. "Next to you is Ernie MacMillan, across from him is Susan Bones, and next to her is Justin Finch-Fletchley. This is Allie, er, Elissa Blackthorn."

"Call me 'Allie'," she said dryly. "Elissa came to a sticky end."

Harry looked at her quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"Elissa was a name that Dido, the Queen of Carthage, was known by," Justin said. "She stabbed herself and jumped in a bonfire rather than betray the memory of her first husband."

Allie blinked, "You've read the classics?" she asked.

Justin shrugged half-heartedly, but it was too late and Allie narrowed in on him.

"Finch-Fletchley?" she asked. "Of the—"

"Yes," Justin said tersely. "I'm surprised you know of them."

"Why?" Allie asked.

Justin looked over at the Slytherin table. "I have discovered that the wizarding world is very, um...insular compared to the non-magical. It was a bit of relief, actually, finding out that the only people who really know of my family are those that are non-magic-born." He grinned, "It was quite funny to see the expression on Father's face when he realized the same thing when Professor McGonagall took us to Diagon Alley."

"Which doesn't explain me, of course," Allie said.

"I had assumed you were one of those 'pure-blood' types," Justin said. "I apologize."

"Nothing to apologize for," Allie said. "You'll find that there are purebloods, and then there are purebloods. The former are those that define themselves by it, and then there are those who define themselves despite it. Fortunately there are more of the latter, but the former are usually louder and more annoying."

"Speaking of which, isn't it...bad for you to be here?" Harry asked. "I've gotten the impression that Slytherins don't really approve of Hufflepuffs."

"Most Slytherins don't really approve of anyone or anything unless it gets them ahead," Allie said. "The older students in my house couldn't care less. Those that follow Draco Malfoy's way of thinking do not, currently, matter a great deal. As far as both are concerned

I'm here furthering my own agenda, which is exactly what I told them I was doing."

"Are you?" Harry asked bluntly.

Allie grinned at him, "Well of course. Right now my agenda is congratulating my friend on breaking the rules, getting caught, and not getting so much as a point taken. If you misconstrued that to mean congratulations on finding a spot on your house Quidditch time, well, I have no comment to make. All in all, I'd say I'm well on my way towards furthering my 'cunning little plan'."

Harry couldn't help but grin back at her and chuckle. Ernie, Justin and Susan all laughed, but the other Hufflepuffs—once reasonably certain that the snake in their midst wasn't Up To Something—had turn to their own conversations.

"Is that really what you told them?" Justin asked.

Allie shook her head as she filled a glass with pumpkin juice, "Of course not. Just that I was furthering a private agenda. What that agenda is, is none of their business."

"You lied," Susan said with a disapproving frown.

"No, I didn't," Allie said. "What I did was misrepresent the truth. I said something that was perfectly true and let them draw their own conclusions from it. It certainly isn't my fault if they drew the wrong ones and I'm not under any obligation to correct their...short-sightedness. Besides, in a way I'm doing exactly what they think I'm doing."

"Huh?" Ernie asked.

"She's making connections," Justin said, "Business connections. Not ones that are profitable now, but may be, will be, so in the future."

"Very nicely put," Allie said, raising her pumpkin juice glass in a salute.

"I don't follow, Justin," Harry said. "I thought she was here because she's our, or at least my, friend."

Justin nodded, "That's it exactly, Harry. But look at us. Ernie here is a pureblood back what, eight generations you said?" he asked his friend.

"Nine," Ernie said.

"Nine," Justin said with a nod. "And Susan has an Aunt who is head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at the Ministry. Harry, you're famous, your parents died in the last war making you a tragic hero."

"The Potters are a really old family and highly thought of," Ernie added.

"And I," Justin said, placing a dramatic hand on his chest, "well, the Finch-Fletchleys have done moderately well in business."

Allie choked on her pumpkin juice, set her goblet down, and wiped her mouth with her napkin. "Moderately well in business?" she repeated with a snort. "You've found all that in less than a week. I'm impressed."

Justin shrugged and didn't smile, "Yes, well... So how did you know about my family? From what you said you are a pureblood, right?"

"Allie spent some time living in the non-magical world," Harry said.

"Really?" Ernie asked with wide eyes.

"Master G, the wizard I was apprenticed to, didn't really care for the mainstream wizarding world," Allie said.

"You were in an apprenticeship?" Susan asked.

Allie nodded. "Never did get much of Professor Snape's 'wand-waving foolishness' so not much in the way of charms and transfiguration as I'm sure you've all heard."

Harry grinned as the others laughed. It had quickly become clear that his friend was nearly as hopeless in those two classes as Neville Longbottom of Gryffindor was in Potions.

Allie glanced towards the Slytherin table, then back at Harry. "I've got to go. I overheard Lee Jordan telling the Weasley twins he found a tunnel out of the castle. I followed him to where I think it is and I want to leave a little surprise for them for all the pranks they've pulled recently."

"Well that was interesting," Ernie said as Allie got up and walked briskly towards the entrance of the Great Hall. "Do you know what kind of magic she studied?"

Harry looked at him.

Ernie shrugged, "It's just that she seems to be...pretty bad at everything except potions."

Pretty bad, Harry reflected, didn't begin to describe it. Burning her desk in charms had simply been the most dramatic of her failures. In transfiguration she had yet to effect any changes, in herbology any plant she touched wilted and died, and the school brooms had flatly refused to work for her.

"Oh," He said after a moment. "I know she studied runes, defense warding too, I think. I'm not sure. Some of it she was vague about and some of it went over my head." All of which, he decided, was perfectly true even if it didn't tell them anything more than he really knew. "I know she was pretty put out that she has to wait two years before she could study runes and arithmancy."

Ernie made a face, "What we study isn't hard enough for her?"

Harry shrugged, but before he could answer someone far less welcome turned up. Draco Malfoy flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Having a last meal, Potter? When are you getting the train back to the muggles?"

"Hello, Draco," Harry said blandly. "I'm fine, thank you for asking. How are you?"

Draco's smile became distinctly unpleasant. "You've heard about Stephan, haven't you?"

"I've heard a lot about Stephan, you'll have to be more specific," Harry said with a level voice that hid the nervousness he felt.

"He's getting off without even points taken," Draco said smugly. "I told you on the train, Potter, that you didn't want to be making friends with the wrong sort."

"Yes," Harry said. "That's why I have friends, and you have bookends."

Standing on either side of Draco, Crabbe and Goyle did look like bookends...or maybe very small trolls. But since they were in the middle of the Great Hall and the High Table was filled with teachers, there was very little they could do besides scowl and crack their knuckles.

"It's why Stephan is still around and you are getting expelled!" Draco snapped.

"I'm getting expelled?" Harry asked.

Draco hesitated. "Well of course you are," he said. "Professor Hooch made it clear what would happen to anyone who left the ground."

"But Stephan Cornfoot isn't being expelled," Harry pointed out.

"My father is on the Board of Governors," Draco said. "I told him about what happened and how they're refusing to enforce the rules."

"Oh, well, as it happens I'm not being expelled," Harry said. "Professor Sprout decided that since it was a first offense she'd just give me a lot of extra work to do for the rest of the year...to keep me out of trouble."

Draco grinned, "She put you in detention for an entire year?"

Harry bit a lower lip to keep from bursting out laughing, but couldn't resist egging on the other boy. "Well...she didn't actually call it detention, but..."

"Oh this is priceless," Draco crowed. "See you around, Potter. I have to tell everyone about this!" He walked away from the table laughing.

Susan leaned over and spoke in a low voice, "You do realize that people are going to think that you—"

"Yes," Harry said, trying not to laugh. "But it's like Allie said, right? I don't have to go around correcting people when they make a mistake. Do I?"

"Merlin no," Ernie agreed. "If you did you'd be like—"

"—Granger has done now?" Ron demanded as he dropped into the empty spot that Allie had vacated only minutes earlier.

Harry couldn't help but noticing the suddenly forced looks on the faces of his housemates as Ron reached across the table to help himself to a chicken leg and tore a bite off before gesturing with the fowl limb for emphasis.

"She's insisting on creating study schedules, for all of us, and she's badgering the upper years for their first-year notes."

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Despite it being after curfew people were still awake in the Hufflepuff common room that evening. The fifth and seventh years were already starting to feel the pinch that preparation for the upcoming O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. examinations would have on their free time. Sixth and fourth years were determined to get an early start on their schoolwork, while the third years were reading the textbooks for their new elective courses. All of these, as well as the new second years, were rereading the material from the previous year.

Not that studying was the only thing happening. Samothrace was crouched with Cedric in one corner, the two of them moving miniature Quidditch players around a model pitch using their wands as they talked furiously in hushed voices. Down by the fire a couple of students had broken out musical instruments and a dozen other Badgers were singing rowdy songs that outside of their immediate area had been magically quieted so they served as background music for those studying. Winifred Meles, the single fifth-year on the Quidditch Team, was teaching an obscure card game that included cards that magically changed their suit and value in mid-hand at seemingly random intervals. The first-year Hufflepuffs didn't have a class early on Friday mornings so Thursday evenings had, in less

than two weeks, become a time for those that wanted to talk about what new experiences they'd had and interesting things they'd seen, heard, or learned.

Harry was just finishing a story about how a stair that had, on Tuesday, led up to the fourth floor had shifted so that on Wednesday led to the Forbidden left-hand corridor on the third floor where he had been caught by Filch, when bells began to chime softly. Where exactly the bells were—or even if there were bells at all—was a matter of some debate, but they only tolled when someone other than a Hufflepuff student was making their way down the primary entrance into Hufflepuff. The Professors, he'd been told, each had their own separate melody, as did those from Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. So far Harry had only heard the Ravenclaw melody, something airy and cold that used a lot of high-pitched bells.

This was different. It used a lot of low bells in a strangely hypnotic melody.

"Grieg," Justin said.

"Excuse me?" Ernie asked.

"Muggle composer," Justin told his friend. "That's one of his better-known pieces. It's—"

Exactly what it was Harry didn't learn because the bells stopped abruptly as Allie stuck her head around the corner into the common room.

"You're out after curfew," one of the older students, a prefect, said.

"No, I was out after curfew," Allie said, "now I'm simply not in the right common room after curfew." She looked around, "Nice place, much more inviting than the Slytherin common room though we have a better view of the lake."

"How did you find our common room?" Thrace demanded.

Allie shrugged, "You're the one with the open door policy, not me."

Thrace smiled a cold smile that reminded Harry of the look Dudley sometimes gave him. "Unless you have a very good reason for

being out I suggest you answer the question...unless you'd rather explain lost points to your housemates?"

"Frankly I could care less about points. There are things more of more importance than a shining cup that is trotted out once a year."

"Maybe," another seventh year said. "Or maybe that's just the voice of someone who has seen it regularly trotted out for them."

"Since this is my first year here I couldn't tell you," Allie said blandly. She shrugged and added, "But since you're so curious about how I found this place the answer is simple. I asked the Fat Friar."

"And he told you, just like that," Thrace said.

"I told him I needed a friend's help," Allie admitted.

"My help, after hours?" Harry asked.

"Sure," she said, "mind you it isn't something you can help me with here so if you don't want to go sneaking around after hours—"

"No," Harry said. "It sounds like fun." He stopped suddenly and glanced around the room, "Um..."

Thrace rolled her eyes, "Go."

"Really?" Harry asked.

"Everyone goes exploring after hours sooner or later, Harry," Cedric said as the other older students chuckled or traded knowing looks. "I admit that most don't usually announce it to their whole House before they do it, though. Go, have fun, just don't get caught."

"Well if that's the attitude here, we could use one more," Allie grinned. "Preferably someone that's good at third-order complex switching charms utilizing runic symbols as point-anchors. A passable familiarity with runes and spell construction would be nice."

"That's...pretty specific," one older boy Harry didn't recognize but who wore the silver badge of a Prefect.

"What do you need that knowledge for?" Cedric asked.

"What's the best kind of prank?" Allie returned.

"This is Hufflepuff, not Ravenclaw," a girl sitting at the card game said.

Allie shrugged slightly.

"The best kind of prank," Tonks said slowly as her hair changed color to a jade green, "is one that doesn't hurt anyone, humiliates its intended targets, and doesn't splash over on anyone else."

Harry looked at her. He'd met the other seventh year on the Hufflepuff Quidditch team earlier in the evening when Thrace had introduced him to the team. Aside from colorful hair and dire threats muttered if anyone should invoke her first name, she had come across as standoffish and kind of rude. She was the last person on the team he'd have expected to show any amount of interest in a prank.

"Interested?"

"Who?" Tonks asked.

"Weasley twins."

"Excellent," Tonks said. She stood, took two steps, and tripped over her left shoe.

"Tonks!" Thrace said, pushing through the other students.

"I'm alright, Cap'n," Tonks groaned. "In fact, I think I'll just lay here for a mo'ent."

"Thrace?" Cedric asked.

"She's fine," the Quidditch Captain told the common room as Tonks slowly climbed back onto her feet. "Just making up for lost time. I knew it was too good to last."

Cedric turned to Harry and Allie. "I'll come."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked.

He nodded. "Someone has to keep Tonks out of trouble and. Besides, I aim to make Prefect next year so I'm well motivated. Getting caught out after curfew would really spoil those plans."

"Can Ernie and I come?" Justin asked.

"Sure," Harry said.

"Alright," Allie said reluctantly. "I suppose we can use a few guards, and eight isn't a whole lot more noticeable than five."

Cedric helped up Tonks as Harry followed Allie down the passage out tumbled out of the painting that led to the Hufflepuff commons, followed by the other four Hufflepuffs.

"You said you were getting a little extra help, Allie, I didn't think you meant half the Hufflepuff Quidditch team," Padma said.

"Don't you mean a third?" her sister asked.

"Harry made the team," Padma informed her.

"Really?"

"Yes, really," Harry said shortly. "Don't tell anyone, please?"

"Harry," Parvati said, sounding hurt. "When have you ever known me to gossip?"

Harry looked at her. The first month of school was not yet over, and Parvati and her roommate Lavender Brown had firmly established their reputations as the biggest gossips in their year, and were making significant progress in their efforts to become the co-Gossip Queens of Hogwarts and Environs.

"I mean when it was something important," Parvati said.

Harry nodded slowly.

"Okay, for those of us who haven't managed to already memorize all of the House quidditch teams' starting line-ups, could you do introductions, Harry?" Allie asked.

"Sure," Harry said. "Cedric, Tonks, these are Padma Patil of Ravenclaw, her sister Parvati of Gryffindor, and Allie, Elissa Blackthorn of Slytherin. Allie, Padma, Parvati, these are Tonks and Cedric Diggory, I think you all already know Ernie and Justin?"

"I thought you were only going to pick up one or two people?" Parvati said after nodding politely to the two older students.

"Yeah, well, I picked up a few guards," Allie said as Cedric and Tonks flicked their wands so that light poured from the tips. "Put those out."

"But—"

"Light carries further than we can see," Padma pointed out quietly.

"The point is not to be noticed, not alert people that we're sneaking about," Parvati added. "Put a hand on the wall to guide yourself. There aren't any pictures down here except that big still-life with the fruit."

"So what's the plan?" Tonks asked as Allie led them down the corridor towards the stairs that led up to the Entrance Hall.

"Fred and George Weasley's pranks are heavily reliant on potions," Allie said. "Not all of them, of course, but the ones they've been pulling that affect an entire house at meals? Those ones are almost entirely potion-based. There are only so many ways to mass administer potions."

"Food," Tonks said. "The house-elves?"

"That was my thinking," Allie said.

"House-elves?" Justin asked quietly.

"I'll explain later," Ernie whispered back.

"So why don't we get the house-elves to slip something into their food?" Tonks asked.

"First, I'm not sure they can deliver a dosed meal that precisely. Remember, they're targeting an entire house," Allie said. "Second, I'm pretty sure the elves would tell them if we tried something like that. I know that if I'd suborned them I'd have a way for them to tell me that someone else was trying to do the same thing."

"What have we here?" a voice asked a moment before Peeves popped into existence in front of them.

"Peeves," Cedric hissed.

"Students of out bed," Peeves grinned at him.

Harry heard Allie mutter a word too quietly for him to make out, but probably wasn't one that the upper years would have approved of.

"Wait, I demand the Riddle," Padma said quickly from behind him.

"The Riddle?" Peeves repeated dubiously. "What is the Riddle?"

"It's in the Rules of the Prank," Padma said. "When one Prankster meets another in execution of a Prank, the first may demand that the second answer a Riddle. If the second fails to do so he is not allowed to call attention to the Prankster, while if he succeeds he can do as he pleases."

"Very well," Peeves said with a nasty grin. "Peevesie has a riddle—"

"Not so fast," Harry said, picking up from Padma. "We demanded the Riddle, we are, therefore, the Prankster. You must answer our Riddle."

"Very well," Peeves said with a sour expression.

"When is a Prank not a Prank?" Padma said.

"And when is not a Prank a Prank," Parvati added with a grin.

"What is the best sort of Prank?" Tonks asked, giving the twins a sideways look as she repeated Allie's question.

"And finally," Allie cut in, "how, by Pranking nobody, can we Prank many?"

"You prank but you do not prank?" Peeves asked. "Bah, what talk is this of Pranking?"

"Tomorrow morning, breakfast, be there and find out," Allie said.

Peeves glowered at her, but then went zooming off.

Cedric, as he had the most experience with Hogwarts' many tricks and none of them were inclined to trust the bubblegum color-haired seventh year, led the way up. If he did run into someone he could wave them off in time for them to hopefully avoid getting in trouble while he tried to talk himself out of it. But the Entrance Hall seemed clear and they gathered at the top of the stairs.

"Great Hall?" he asked Allie as Harry peered around.

The Entrance Hall was very different at night with the high windows closed and all of the torches and lamps put out. It felt very...big. He could barely see across the hall to where the doors of the Great Hall were closed, and the suits of armor that stood sentry to either side of it were little more than blobs of darker shadows. The ceiling and upper floors were swallowed up by an impenetrable blackness.

As he watched, tiny flecks of light appeared a few floors above them light appeared and began bobbing and weaving as they slowly moved down the grand stairs.

Harry reached over and tugged on Cedric's sleeve and gestured upwards.

"Wand-lights," the older boy said in a hushed tone. "I don't know the prefect's patrol schedule. Tonks?"

"Do I look like a bloody prefect?" she hissed.

"It's okay, I have a distraction ready," Allie said.

Padma made a sound.

"Okay, Padma has a distraction ready," Allie said as a ghost emerged from the doors of the Great Hall. "But I have someone scouting for us."

It floated across the Entrance Hall until all could recognize the Bloody Baron. Then the ghost made a short bow, then drifted off to the right and disappeared.

"Great Hall is clear," Allie said. "There aren't any wards or alarm spells on the doors, I checked last night. How about that distraction?"

"Any second now," Padma said. "I don't know any good timing spells so I had to use a potion that'd melt through the stopper of an inverted vial in a certain amount of time. When that happens it'll spill into a beaker of another potion and will cause a brief explosion and produce fumes with mildly hallucinogenic effects."

Cedric looked at her askance, then at Harry as though to ask 'just what have you gotten me involved in?'

Padma must have caught the look because she shrugged. "There was a recipe for a luminescent skin cream in July's Teen Witch that involved blending two potions together. The explosion is a part of the process which is why the recipe calls for a broad-brimmed cauldron, the blast-wave has a lower pressure wave."

"I remember reading that one," Parvati hissed. "The most common error is not stewing the ergot long enough resulting in the fumes, and using a small cauldron—"

As she said this there was a flash of light from somewhere above them accompanied by a muffled whumpf that echoed from down a long hallway. The wand-lights, still well above them, stopped, and then hurriedly disappeared.

"Let's go," Harry hissed. Allie moved and he led the way across the hall, quickly opening the door of the Great Hall wide enough for the others to slip through, and turning to watch as they crossed the Entrance Hall. Cedric followed after with Tonks and managed to keep her from tripping over her feet.

"Okay, now what's this great prank?" Tonks demanded after Harry had quietly closed the door.

"Rules of the Prank?" Harry asked Padma.

"It did sound good, didn't it?" she asked, clearly pleased with herself.

"You mean they don't actually exist?" Justin asked as someone snickered.

"They do now," Parvati said. "One of them anyway. We'll just have to come up with a few more."

"Quick thinking, Padma, Harry," Allie said.

"Thank you," Padma replied.

"I don't believe...they got one over on Peeves," Cedric muttered to himself. "I didn't think that was possible. Heck, it isn't natural. Just what have you gotten me involved in, oh Seeker-of—"

"Seeker!" Padma blurted. "Is that what Professor Sprout has you doing?"

Harry hesitated, "I, uh..."

"What are you talking about?" her sister asked.

"His position," Padma said. "I thought they had put him on reserves or something, but that isn't the case, is it?"

"Padma," Parvati growled.

"I thought they had put him on the roles as a reserve of their quidditch team," Padma said. "But Cedric is, was, the Hufflepuff Seeker. If Harry has that role now it means he's on the primary squad. You know how Malfoy's been telling everyone that Professor Sprout has him in detention for the rest of the year? Well I bet those detentions are cover for quidditch training, aren't they?" she asked rounding on Harry.

"I didn't say anything about detentions and Professor Sprout didn't say anything about detention," Harry said.

"Clever, Harry," Padma said. "Nice evasion, been taking lessons from Allie, have you?" she asked, putting her hands on her hips. "I note you haven't denied it."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Parvati demanded.

"Because it is supposed to be a secret," Harry hissed. "I just told Draco that I was being let off light because it was the first time I broke the rules and that I was being given extra work for the rest of the year."

"Don't knock it, Harry, you convinced him that you've been punished," Allie said. "Thanks to him the rest of the school thinks you've been given detention for the rest of the year."

"You knew?" Padma demanded.

"I figured it out," Allie said mildly.

"Then why didn't you tell us?" Parvati demanded. "I thought you were my friend!"

"Do you want me to tell Padma about the pink elephant?"

Parvati paled and shook her head vigorously as Padma asked "Pink elephant?"

"Then don't expect me to tell you other peoples' secrets if you don't want me to tell them yours."

"As fascinating as this is...the prank?" Tonks asked.

"Magic has a signature," Allie said. "It usually isn't specific enough that you can tell who cast a particular spell unless you're in an area where a person has done a great deal of magic, the spell was really powerful, or you are capable of a lot more than what we can pull off at this point. You can, however, usually track a spell back to a wand...and you can use a signature you know to filter spells."

"Elphabates' Third," Cedric said, nodding slowly.

"What's that?" Harry asked.

"One of the laws that explain what you can and cannot do," Cedric said. "You'll pick up Elphabates next year."

"And third-order switching spells?"

"Switch spells that don't switch objects directly, but...allow future objects to be switched...I think," the older boy said with less certainty than he had answered Harry's previous question.

"What it'll allow us to do is switch something dosed by the Weasleys with the corresponding food from the High Table," Allie said.

"You want to prank the teachers?" Padma hissed.

"No," Allie said. "The Weasleys are going to prank the teachers, they just won't know it."

"Devious, cunning, get pranks on the teachers without actually doing anything, using other peoples' work for your own ends...what a perfectly Slytherin prank," Parvati said.

"You're just upset you didn't think of it first," Padma retorted.

"That's great, but I have no idea of how to do a switching spell like that," Tonks interrupted.

"Runic symbols as point-anchors," Allie said. "That's why the need for a third-order charm. You'll see what I mean. Padma, Parvati, did you get the things I asked for?"

Padma produced a length of string, some chalk, and a few vials while Parvati took a few flasks of some glowing potions out of her pockets, and then a vial that didn't seem to have anything in it.

"Excellent."

Harry watched as Allie moved off to the center of the room, and having Padma hold down one end of the string, used it and the chalk to begin sketching out circles in the center of the Hall between the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables.

"Justin, Ernie, keep a lookout," he said.

One magical circle comprised of two circles, one inside the other, was already done, and Allie was using a stick of chalk and one of the vials to mark down runes in-between the lines. There were

marks for where two more should be centered, so Harry took a piece of string and gestured for Parvati to hold down the center as he laid down two more sets of circles to either side of the one Allie was working on. With the three circles down he began copying the runes that Allie had inscribed into the first circle into one of the ones he'd just drawn, including a triangle that filled the center of the circle.

"Very nice," she told him, observing his work. "Of course, a thaumaturgic triangle is just about the simplest pattern there is, but we don't need anything more elaborate for what we're doing."

"Parvati, that rune has to be drawn in one go, you can't lift the chalk after each line. Each line has to flow from the proceeding line and into the succeeding line."

"What do you want me to do next?" Harry asked after he finished working on his circle.

Allie pulled out several pieces of parchment and unrolled them on the Hufflepuff table. Each had a separate triangle filled with a drawing.

"Runes?" Harry asked.

She nodded. "Technically the center is a sigil, but for our purposes, runes. They have to be drawn exactly, so don't be afraid to rub it out and start over if you make a mistake."

"Cedric, Tonks, each of the house tables needs seven of each of these designs spaced equidistantly down their length."

"I'm not sure I see what you're doing," Cedric spoke up. "The runes clearly link the two, so I'm assuming that the ones on the floor are somehow of identifying a magical signature."

"What I'm going to do is empower the runes," Allie said, gesturing to the floor. "That'll show the copies on the table what to look for. Then we're going to inscribe more on the high table. The switching charm is cast on the runes. Tonks, the last step is the tricky part that we need you for. We want the runes linked so that the switching spell flows between them, we don't want the runes themselves switched."

Cedric's eyes widened and he pursed his lips in a silent whistle. Tonks was more enthusiastic. "That is some seriously neat magic," she said.

"I thought so," Allie said before moving off to work on the High Table.

Harry waved Justin and Ernie over and explained the rune and how to draw it on the tables and where, and offered to let them work on it while he stood guard since he had done the circles on the floor.

He had only been watching for a few minutes when he saw movement on one of the stairs. "Someone's coming," he hissed. He heard the scratching of the chalk cease, and a moment later someone pressed against his back and he looked up to find Cedric leaning over him to peer outside.

The figure was shadowy, not using a wand-light to find its way, and it moved without pausing to the front doors and opened one wide.

"That's Professor Quirrell," Harry said softly as moonlight revealed a turbaned figure. His robes felt stifling as the suddenly oppressive tension grew thick enough cut.

Quirrell froze and looked around.

Harry and Cedric both pulled back from the door, as if simply being near it would be enough to alert the DADA Professor to their presence. But at last the front door closed with a soft thud, and when Harry looked again the hall was empty. "He's gone," he reported.

Cedric checked for himself before nodding in agreement. "We're clear."

The scratching of chalk resumed.

At length Justin and Ernie returned to take up watching again while Harry returned to doing runes down the length of the Gryffindor table as Allie checked on the others' work.

"Okay," he said, once he'd finished his last rune and saw the others had all finished with theirs. "Twenty-one runes per table, spread down the length of each of four tables, plus...only three on the Head

Table?" The three on the Head Table were much more elaborate than the simple runes on the house tables, almost miniature copies of the circles on the floor.

Allie nodded in agreement.

"What next?" he asked.

"Parvati managed to procure for us samples of some of the potions they use," she said, gesturing to the flasks that were now sitting inside the circles. "She also got a sample of their hair, which we can use to tie their personal magical signatures to each." Allie held up the vial, and on close inspection Harry could see a number of ginger-colored hairs inside of it. "And now everybody just takes a step back and lets me work."

Harry gestured the others back, though all watched as she sat down cross-legged by the three circles. Even Ernie and Justin had moved from the doors to watch.

For a moment she just chanted softly, then glowing blobs of color appeared above each of the circles. More chanting, this time accompanied by motions of a knife Allie had gotten from somewhere, caused the blobs to merge over the central circle. For a moment a sticky-looking brown glob of mystical goop hung above the central-most circle, then colors began to drift away towards the potions.

Finally she was left with a clear dark yellow sphere shot through with an opaque robin's egg blue. Carefully she introduced the hairs into it, and the whole became suffused with a reddish-orange color.

Allie stood carefully. "I need someone to picture all of the runes on the house tables, but not the Head Table, turning that color, and then poke it with their wand."

"Why can't you do it?" Harry asked curiously as he stepped forward.

"I need to maintain it."

"Makes sense," Cedric said from somewhere behind him.

Harry closed his eyes, visualized the color moving into the runes the same way he had first lit the candle, and then poked the blob of

magic color. The circle was thick and resisted his wand. The closest he could compare it to was a balloon from one of Dudley's birthdays had been forgotten behind the couch one time, and he'd been able to play with it for a full five minutes before his Aunt Petunia had shrieked at him and snatched it away. But after several seconds his wand slowly slid in until it was touching the blob of magic color.

"Wow," someone said, and he opened his eyes. Ribbons of light were streaking from the glowing blob to each of the runes like continuous, silent, perfectly-straight bolts of colored lightening.

"Very nicely done," Allie agreed as the lightshow played out around them.

Harry turned, trying to watch everything at once and saw Ernie and Justin standing in the middle of the room. "Justin, the door," he said quickly.

Justin tore himself from the lightshow long enough to check to see if anyone had seen the light, but no one had and he waved that they were still okay.

"Charms now?" Tonks asked when the light died.

"Now the charms," Allie agreed. She passed over a scroll. "Each of the runes on the house tables needs to be linked with one on the High Table. I made a map so you can see which one needs to be linked where. I have one more rune I need to put in, the control rune."

"What if you can't get to a particular spot at the Slytherin table?" Cedric asked. "I mean...apprenticeship or not, you're still a first year."

"That's why I'm putting it at Hufflepuff," she said. "Harry and his friends have been sitting in pretty much the same spot. I'll put it there."

"Okay," Cedric said, tagging after Tonks who was casting switching spells.

"Harry, this is a one-shot deal. There is a tiny flaw in the runes that will cause them to...burn out, for want of a better term, once they've

been used. If it isn't triggered the magic will naturally degrade," Allie told him. "I'd be surprised if it lasted more than a couple of weeks considering how magically powerful this place is. However, you can't activate it if the Weasley's haven't put any of their doctored stuff out. Doing that would be...bad."

"Understood," Harry said. "Er, how do I turn it on and off?"

"Um," she bit her lip and considered the tables. "Do you think a wand tap would be too much?"

Harry shook his head. "That sounds good."

She nodded and dived under the Hufflepuff table near where he usually sat.

"Can I start cleaning up the circles?" he asked.

"You need to break them first, but yes."

Harry went to the first circle and reached out with a hand, slowly approaching until the palm of his hand brushed against the intangible something that he had just pushed his wand through. He took a deep breath and steadied his legs as his hand went numb and all the hairs on his neck stood up in the wash of power from the circle. Closing his eyes he pictured the circle and the energy it contained. Allie had shown him how to do this one time when she had visited the Patils in August, but it was the first time he was going to try to break one on his own without her closely monitoring him. Picturing the energy remaining contained he quickly brushed his foot over the outer chalk line, smearing it and breaking the magic that contained the spell inside the circle.

Instantly the magic began to pour out of it in a flood and Harry pushed against it, trying to imagine himself as a dam and slowing the rush of released energy. His body went numb a moment before the magic began to course through him. It reminded him of a cross between his first hot shower, and what he imagined grabbing a live electrical wire would feel like.

The well of power tapered off until it was little more than a trickle, and then it wasn't even that. Despite his eyes being closed he could see the circle he had just drained. The other two were still bright, live

with magical energy, but the one in front of him was little more than chalk lines on the floor. He reached out to the other two without moving, grasped the power they contained, and pushed it 'down'. He didn't have to physically break the circles like he had with the first, just reach out with the power that was now—at least for the moment—indescribably his and willed them to release their power into Hogwarts.

Harry opened his eyes to see the tables, walls, everything in the Great Hall, literally crawling with a light so intense he brought up a hand to protect his eyes.

"What was that?" he heard Tonks hiss.

"Harry was showing off," Padma said, her voice soft in wonder.

"Not intentionally," Harry protested. "I had to drain off the power still inside the circles in order to break them."

"And we all felt it," Justin said.

"Everyone in the entire castle probably felt that," Parvati retorted.

"Harry," Allie said, crossing to him in three brisk steps. "Are you all right?"

"I'm wonderful," Harry said, staring intently at his hand. He could see the magic flowing under and above his skin.

"You don't look all right," Cedric said.

Harry turned and started to say 'I'm fine', but he stopped, the words unspoken. Before him stood two figures in armor.

Cedric—unmistakably Cedric though he bore little resemblance to the older boy he knew—was older and bigger than the version he knew, and was wearing heavy plate armor. He had a shield that was split evenly yellow and black, and had a matching tunic-like garment over the armor that split into a checkered pattern below a broad leather belt that was circled twice about him. A yellow cape was slung about his shoulders and fell to trail behind him on the ground. He had a helmet, though its visor was up, and while he wore a

sword belted at his side in his hand that wasn't occupied with a shield he held a heavy metal club with a flanged head.

Tonks was also older and a little taller, with long black hair that flowed freely behind her in some unseen wind, and her eyes hidden behind a white bandage. She wore a suit of plate armor, but where Cedric's was plain and practical, hers was polished to a silvery-bright shine had a fantastic quality to it, like it was the idea of armor than armor itself. She brandished a sword before her that shone like a rainbow twisted into steel in her right hand, while in her left she bore a set of scales. Her face managed to look both joyous and implacable, and yet incredibly serene, and he could sense that despite the blindfold she could see everything.

"Harry?" Allie repeated.

At his name he turned to look at her, and instantly wished she hadn't. Allie wore robes that were threadbare and old, and she leaned heavily on a staff that was carved with half-finished runes. She didn't look much older, but the familiar smirk was missing from lips that were thin and pinched. Her black hair hung in limps locks that partially shielded remote and tired-looking eyes from the pale green glow coming from the heavy metal lantern she carried.

Behind her, hovering like a malignant specter, was another image of her. She had none of the tiredness of the first image but her eyes danced with unholy glee and her smirk was cold and cruel in a way that he couldn't recall the real Allie's ever being. Her robes were of some rich fabric and heavily decorated, and the staff she bore was fully carved with elaborate runes.

Most disturbing, however, was that while the first image still looked basically healthy, the specter that overshadowed her was anything but. Her skin was stretched tightly over her bones, webbed with blue veins on her hands and sallow where purple, green and yellowing bruises hadn't marred her face. Burst blood vessels made her eyes—filmy with cataracts—appear red.

The tired woman lifted the lantern a little higher, turning to brandish it at the specter which retreated with a pained scream. The odd, pale green light extended a little further, and flickering at the edges of it Harry could see a vast horde of human figures that recoiled in concert with the specter.

He jerked away and what he saw next made him want to weep. Standing in the doors of the Great Hall was the girl he remembered from the train, Hermione Granger, or an older version of her, wearing glowing white robes of some archaic style—Greek, or perhaps Roman? He wasn't sure—and her bushy hair was held back by an ancient-looking helmet. Her eyes were filled with crackling white lightning as she read from a massive tome in her left hand. An owl, large and pure white in a way that even Hedwig wasn't, rode her left shoulder, and she held a spear with a shaft of silver-blue metal that was taller than him and had a blade formed of perfectly white light that was longer than his forearm.

She lowered the spear, pointing with it, and Harry turned to see a badger, well, what he supposed a badger would look like if it stood on two legs and had arms and hands like humans did. It was short and stout, and its black fur was grizzled around its jaws.

Something wrapped itself around his forehead and jerked his head back, breaking the...vision? He wasn't certain. A band tightened around his head, pulling hairs that were trapped in it, and his head was jerked again as a knot was tightened.

"Are you with us now, Harry?" Allie's voice asked sharply.

Harry looked around the hall. Tiny, tightly-spaced glowing runes still flowed up the walls and across the tables and floor, only to ripple where the others stood. He chanced a quick half-glance towards where he thought Tonks stood, not wanting to look at Allie again. Tonks, normal, bubblegum-haired Tonks, looked at him worriedly.

"You don't need to go to the hospital wing, do you?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Harry said, "I think." He reached up to touch the—bandage?—tied around his forehead but Allie slapped his hand away.

"What the hell happened?" Cedric demanded.

"Harry forgot to dispel the magic inside the circle before breaking it," Allie said. "Then he tried to use his own power to slow down the rush of energy instead of getting out of its way, so he got his third eye blasted open."

"You knew this would happen," Harry said.

"Only if you didn't de-power the circle first," Allie said. She turned back to him, "And you won't ever make that mistake again, will you?"

"No," Harry said with a shudder, the disturbing double-image of his friend was still as sharp as if he were still watching it.

"And the light show?" Cedric said.

"Harry fed the power of the other two circles directly into the school, into the wards I mean, rather than releasing it into...ambient energy. Look, Diggory, it doesn't matter right now. What matters is that probably everyone in the school felt that."

"Which means we have to leave," the boy said quickly. "Can those circles be safely vanished?"

Allie nodded. "Harry did the hard work; they're not more than chalk lines now."

"Scourgify," Cedric said, waving his wand at the floor between the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables just as the door of the Great Hall opened.

Harry whirled towards the doors, his wand in his hand though he couldn't recall drawing it, but the person who'd entered the room wasn't the Professor he had thought. It wasn't even a prefect.

"Granger?" Parvati hissed. "What are you—you followed me?"

"Of course I did," Hermione said. "I was trying to stop you before you did something foolish." She looked at the glowing hall, then at the doors. "We're going to be in so much trouble," she moaned softly.

"We're not far from our common room," Tonks said.

"The burrows?" Harry asked aloud, more to himself than his housemate. He nodded sharply, "right, we'll do that. Cedric, take Tonks across first." He hadn't asked, didn't really know the older girl, but he just knew that the fall in the sett hadn't been a one-off.

"Not only sneaking around, but you injured someone too?" Hermione asked. "The hospital wing—"

"Granger," Allie said, "unless you want to explain to your housemates how you not only lost an incredible number of points for Gryffindor, but why you were found tied up in the Headmaster's chair in the Great Hall, I suggest you be quiet."

"The Professors would believe me," she said sharply.

"That what, a cabal of students from all four houses secretly tricked you into roaming the halls after hours so that they could tie you to a chair in the Great Hall? Because really, that's what this whole thing was about."

"If you two are done?" Cedric asked, brushing past them to crack open the door. "Looks clear," he reported.

Tonks stumbled into one of the suits of armor flanking the doors of the Great Hall, but Cedric was able to catch her and Harry caught the armor before it clattered to the floor. He was only just barely able to hold it up, but then Justin, Ernie, and Allie were there and they quickly got it standing again.

Harry clapped Justin on the back, the muggleborn grinned back at him and then he and Ernie took off across the Entrance Hall. They made it across as well, for some reason the Entrance Hall seemed much brighter than he remembered it being when he'd been standing guard. He could see Cedric wave for him to send the next pair, and Allie almost sent Padma and Parvati across before he stopped them.

She turned to look at him and he pointed to the floor of the Hall to one side. A swatch of stone floor was clearly lighter than the rest.

"Someone is coming up the cross corridor at the end of the hall," Hermione announced from behind him, but at least she had kept her voice low. "We're all going to be caught."

"No," Harry said, he pointed towards a side staircase that he couldn't remember seeing during the day. It was on the same side as the corridor emerged from, and more importantly they didn't have to go across the hall to reach it.

"Move, Harry," Allie hissed. "We'll be right behind you."

Harry scrambled as quietly as he could to the staircase. It was old and made of wood, but he had had enough practice with the Dursleys' staircase. By only stepping on the sides of the stairs, rather than the middle, he was able to keep it from squeaking. The staircase led to a broad hall lined with statues and a heavy rug that padded the middle of it so his feet left no sounds. Despite there being no torches or windows he could see quite clearly. In fact, everything around him seemed to give off a soft light.

"Slow down," he heard Parvati hiss. He turned to find Padma and Parvati flanking Hermione, Allie was behind them, a hand on a shoulder of each twin as she guided them down the hall. "How can you even see where you're going?" she demanded.

"I just can," he said. "Everything is glowing."

"Mage-sight?" Padma asked. "How'd you develop mage-sight?"

"Backwash from releasing the circles," Allie suggested. "And it's probably only a sensory boost, making his eyes more efficient. True mage-sight is linked to the third-eye and I've already shut that down." She pulled out a pocket watch with slightly glowing hands. "We were too efficient."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Hermione demanded.

"It means we've got a while yet before my next diversion goes off," Allie said. "What?" she asked, "Did you honestly think Padma was the only one who set one up?"

"Never mind," Padma hissed. "Does anyone recognize where we are?"

"Doesn't matter, does it?" Harry asked. "We can only go forward."

"Fair enough, oh mage-sighted one," Parvati said, grinning at him. "You go first."

Harry led them down the corridor, feeling rather foolish with an upraised wand that he didn't know how to light and didn't need too

as he could see quite well without it. There was an abrupt alcove to the right that turned out to be a landing for a staircase.

"I know this stair," Hermione said. "It's a corridor and another staircase away from Gryffindor Tower."

But the stair did not lead to a corridor. It led to a large room filled with dusty display cases. The walls were lined with shields and plaques, while banners and tapestries hung from the ceilings. Heavily engraved cups and plates twinkled from their stands, and statues lurked between the display cases and in the corners of the room. There was a heavy silver chalice on a velvet pillow in its own display case near the center. Near it, in another case, was a very plain-looking iron cauldron. A trio of long cases held gold and silver-colored swords, while a collection of crowns, scepters, and objects Harry couldn't begin to identify they were so gem-encrusted, glittered nearby.

"The Trophy Room," Parvati said flatly. "We're miles from where any of us need to be."

Hermione scowled at her, "But the map said quite clearly that—"

"Maps don't work in Hogwarts," Padma hissed at the Gryffindor. "Haven't you figured it out yet? Hogwarts moves around too much for maps to work."

There was a noise in the next room that made them jump.

"Sniff around," a cold, dry voice hissed in the darkness. "Sniff, sniff around, my sweet, those terrible students may be lurking in a corner."

It was Filch speaking to Mrs. Norris. Horror-struck, Harry waved madly at the others to follow him as quickly as possible. They scurried across the room towards the door furthest from the one Filch was coming from. Padma's robes had barely whipped around the door when they heard Filch's voice again.

"They're in here somewhere," they heard him mutter. "Only one place those Entrance Hall stairs lead one this night. Check the corners, my sweet, that's where they'll be hiding."

"This way!" Harry mouthed to the others and began to creep down a long gallery full of suits of armor. They could hear Filch getting nearer.

"Uh oh," Parvati said.

"Uh oh?" Hermione demanded in a furious whisper. "What does that mean?"

"When Allie asked Padma to set up a distraction I, uh, couldn't resist putting in one of my own," Parvati admitted.

"So?" Harry asked.

"I, um, used one of Neville's potions and sort of hid it in a suit of armor in this gallery. What?" she asked as the four turned and gave her furious looks, "it wasn't like I knew we were going to be making a secret getaway down—"

A suit of armor shrieked as its legs dissolved into a puddle of purple goo. The rest of the armor toppled to the ground. The clanging and crashing were enough to wake the castle that had managed to sleep through the rush of magical energy.

"RUN!" Harry yelled, and the five sprinted down the gallery, not looking back to see whether or not Filch was following—they swung around a doorpost and galloped down one corridor, then another, with Harry in the lead and no idea where they were or where they were going.

They hit a stairway going down, and Harry, in a spurt of half-crazed glee, hopped up on the polished banister and rode it down faster than he could have run the stairs. So fast, in fact, that he couldn't get his legs under him in time and he stumbled towards a wall. He managed to get his arm up, but instead of colliding with the stone wall he barreled through a tapestry into a secret passage. The extra room was enough for him to get his feet back under him, and the four girls followed hot on his heels until they emerged from the secret passage near the Charms classroom which was nearly on the opposite side of the school from the Trophy Room.

"I think we've lost them," Harry panted, leaning against a cold stone wall and wiping his forehead. Allie nodded from where she was leaning against the wall opposite him and breathing heavily.

"I—told—you," Hermione gasped, clutching at a stitch in her side. "I—told—you."

"We have to get back to our dorms," Padma said quietly though she too was breathing heavily, "as quickly as possible."

"I can't believe we destroyed a suit of armor," Hermione moaned. "We're going to be in so much trouble. Out after hours, running in the corridors, destroying school property..."

"Hey," Parvati said suddenly. "I destroyed a suit of armor. Hmm."

"What?" Padma asked.

"Oh, I was just thinking. My horoscope told me a knight would fall for me, I just didn't think it meant it literally."

A doorknob rattled and Harry hissed "Quiet." A moment later something came shooting out of a classroom in front of them.

It was Peeves again. He caught sight of them and gave a squeal of delight.

"Shut up, Peeves," Harry hissed, "Please—you'll get us thrown out."

Peeves cackled. "Wandering around at night, Ickle Firsties? Tut, tut, tut. Naughty, naughty, you'll get caughty."

"Not if you don't give us away, Peeves, please."

"Should tell Filch, I should," said Peeves in a saintly voice, but his eyes glittered wickedly. "It's for your own good, you know."

"Wait," Padma said desperately, "I demand a Riddle."

"Can't," Allie said softly. "We're in the egress phase."

"STUDENTS OUT OF BED!" Peeves bellowed, "STUDENTS OUT OF BED DOWN THE CHARMS CORRIDOR!"

Ducking under Peeves, they ran for their lives down the corridor and down a flight of stairs, not sure of where they were. They found themselves in another corridor and raced down it as well, right to the end where they slammed into a door—and it was locked.

"End of the line," Parvati said in a ghastly whisper. "We're trapped."

They could hear footsteps. Filch running as fast as he could toward Peeves' shouts.

"Heck with that, someone use the unlocking charm," Allie hissed.

"Why don't you come up here and use it?" Parvati hissed at Allie who was at the back of the pack.

"Because if I do I'll either blast the door off its hinges, or start a fire that no one can put out," Allie retorted.

"Oh, move over," Hermione snarled. She snatched Harry's wand from him and tapped the lock, whispering as she did so, "Alohomora!"

The lock clicked and the door swung open with nary a squeak. They piled through it, shut it quickly, and pressed their ears against it, listening.

"Which way did they go, Peeves?" Filch was saying. "Quick, tell me."

"Say 'please.'"

"Don't mess with me, Peeves, now where did they go?"

"Shan't say nothing if you don't say please," said Peeves in his most annoying sing-song voice.

"All right—please."

"NOTHING! Ha ha! Haaaaa! Told you I wouldn't say nothing if you didn't say please! Ha ha! Haaaaaa!" and they heard the sound of Peeves whooshing away and Filch cursing in rage.

"He thinks this door is locked," Harry whispered. "I think we'll be okay."

"Maybe not, Harry," Padma said softly. "look."

Harry wanted to sink against the stone floor. His robes were warm and damp with sweat, his breathing was ragged, first from the terrifying run through the school and then the tense minutes of not daring to breathe as they waited for Filch to leave. He turned around. For a moment he was quite sure that he had walked into a nightmare—this was far too much, on top of everything that had happened so far.

They weren't in a room, as he had supposed. They were in a corridor. The forbidden corridor on the third floor. And now they knew why it was forbidden.

They were looking straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a dog that filled the whole space between ceiling and floor. It had three heads. Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes; three noses, twitching and quivering in their direction; three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs.

It was standing quite still, all six eyes staring at them, and Harry knew that the only reason they weren't yet dead was that their sudden appearance had taken it by surprise, but it was quickly getting over that, there was no mistaking what those thunderous growls meant.

Harry groped for the doorknob—between Filch and death, he'd take Filch. But the door had relocked itself and the knob was still in Harry's hand. It was Padma who pushed him aside this time and tried the unlocking spell, but the spell bounced off.

"Warded door," Allie muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Parvati demanded.

"That whoever set this up didn't want anyone who got in the way we did, to be able to get out the same way," Allie said, her voice calm as though not at all concerned about her impending demise. "Or it could be that the door has some kind of enchantment that learns so that once a spell is used it becomes warded against that spell. Or it

could be a one-way portal. A door from the outside but a wall from in here. That's the way I would have set it up if I were doing the warding."

"Can you get us out?" Harry asked.

The dog made up its mind about which of them it was going to kill first and started to lunge for Hermione, but a thin wailing sounded echoed through the halls of Hogwarts. It slowly grew louder, accompanied by a droning noise.

The giant dog huffed angrily and the left head yawned, its gaping jaws wide enough that Harry could have stood upright in them. The dog huffed again as it lay down, and went back to sleep.

"Bagpipes?" Hermione asked.

"Asked a ghost I met," Allie said as the piper, apparently satisfied with that his instrument was in tune, took up 'Scotland, the Brave'. She bent over the lock. "I can probably disrupt the warding so that one of you can cast the unlocking charm and get us out, but it will destroy the ward which will let whoever set this up know that someone was here. On the other hand..." she reached into a pocket and came up with a couple pieces of twisted metal. She fed them into the lock, and shortly later there was a heavy thunk and the door swung open.

They spilled through it onto the floor and Harry swung the door shut again. Filch must have gone to search for them elsewhere because he was gone. Aside from the bagpipes echoing through the corridors there were no signs that anyone else was even still up.

"Lockpicks?" Harry asked.

"Sometimes the non-magical solution is still the best solution," Allie said satisfactorily as she pocketed the pieces of bent metal.

"Well," Padma said, laying on the floor and trying not to giggle. "That was interesting."

"Yeah, how are we going to cheat Death next week?" her sister asked, she wasn't trying not to giggle.

"Not that," Padma said. "Didn't you see what it was standing on?"

"The floor?" Harry suggested. "I wasn't looking at its feet, I was too busy looking at its heads."

"No, not the floor," Hermione said crossly. Unlike the other students she had picked herself up and brushed off her robes as soon as the door was shut. "It was standing on a trapdoor. It's obviously guarding something."

She glared at them. "I hope you're pleased with yourselves. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to go back to Gryffindor Tower and go to bed before any of you come up with another brilliant plan to get us all killed—or worse, expelled."

With that, Hermione turned and stalked down the corridor.

"Well," Harry said sardonically as he watched the twins, "I suppose it's nice to know that somebody has their priorities in order."

The effect was every bit he could have hoped for.

The twins cracked up and Allie shook so hard keeping her laughter silent that she had to brace herself against the wall and made choking sounds.

"She's right about one thing," Padma said after the moment passed. "I'm going to bed. I don't want to be late for breakfast."

"You want us to take you there?" Parvati asked.

Her sister shook her head. "Ravenclaw Tower isn't that far."

Harry shook hands with Parvati and then Allie who both left shortly thereafter with an injunction that he was not to remove the bandage she had tied around his head until after the sun had risen and then to burn it. But Hermione had given Harry yet another thing to think about as he headed by himself towards the entrance to the Hufflepuff common room, not even noticing that the mage-sight—which had so helpfully allowed him to see in Hogwarts dark corridors—was gone. The dog was guarding, something... What had Hagrid said? Gringotts was the safest place in the world for something that you wanted to hide—except perhaps Hogwarts.

It looked as though Harry had found out where whatever it was that Hagrid had been sent to collect from Gringotts—and that someone had later tried to steal from the same place—had ended up.

Chapter Nine: Broomsticks (sans Bedknobs)

- 1) Never astride the broom.
 - 2) Technically, a Witch is always a lady, except when circumstances dictate otherwise.
 - 3) Take an easy, graceful sideways position.
 - 4) Now, to start up the broom, your basic formula: lakipo nikrif scrumpet leetch.
- Instructions accompanying broom, from the Emelius Browne Correspondence College of Witchcraft.
 - Bedknobs and Broomsticks-

Cedric and Tonks had been waiting, though Ernie and Justin had both gone to bed, when Harry finally returned to the Settle in the wee hours of the morning. He had given them a brief accounting of their run through the corridors and galleries of Hogwarts, though he left out finding what was awaiting those who entered the Forbidden third-floor corridor on the right-hand side. They had grinned when he told them about Parvati's horoscope, and Tonks had fallen out of her chair when he told them Hermione's reaction.

Harry was so tired after his late-night adventure that he didn't hear his alarm go off the next morning, and thus found himself one of the last Hufflepuffs in the Great Hall which was, thankfully, no longer glowing. The rest of his House was as eager as he was to see what their prank had wrought. Harry slid into the open space between Justin and Susan and felt around the underside of the table until he felt the tingle from the magical rune Allie had sketched there.

"Well?" Ernie hissed from across the table.

Harry didn't feel anything from the rune, though he was sure he was sitting in the right spot. He ducked under the table quickly and started to prod the table with the tip of his wand before quickly remembering Allie's warning about how it would only work once. After a moment of thought he conjured some yellow sparks that blasted into the underside of the table. The rune glowed briefly, then went out.

"Looks like they didn't try to prank anyone today," he said, sticking his head back above the table

Justin glanced around the hall. "Do you think we can taunt them into doing something?"

"You do remember that the thing we did last night will only work if they do something to the food, right?" Ernie asked his friend.

The look on Justin's face said quite clearly that no, he hadn't thought of that. He started to reply, but someone said "Look!"

Suddenly everyone in the Great Hall was watching the owls arrive with the morning mail, and in particular six very large screech owls that were carrying a long, thin package. They flew over the Head Table, banked into a right turn, and swept low as they flew down the Hufflepuff table. The owls released their load in front of a cluster of third-years, and the package skidded down the table, disrupting platters of bacon and pancakes, upsetting pitchers of pumpkin juice and milk, and nearly tipping jugs of syrup, before finally stopping in front of Harry.

He started to reach for it when a screech from overhead made him pull back and look up just in time to see another owl, near the ceiling of the Great Hall wing-over. It plummeted towards the table, punching through the flock of owls that were flying about the hall at a lesser altitude in a fair impersonation of a dive-bomber going through a cloud.

It screeched again, the vocalization distorted as it both approached and gained in speed. At the last possible moment it frantically pulled out of its dive, a letter in a parchment envelope burying itself corner-down in Harry's stack of pancakes. For a moment the owl looked like it was going to crash as it zoomed down the table, often below eye-level of the students sitting at it, before it desperately began to flap its wings and gain altitude.

"Let me guess," Justin said dryly. "That one's called Stuka."

"How can you tell? I didn't see a name tag," Ernie said.

Justin shook his head. "The stuka was a kind of..." he paused, then shook his head again. "Never mind, Ernie, it's a muggle thing."

Hedwig, who had come down from the owlery to nibble at Harry's bacon, made a disgusted sound.

"Of course they were showing off," Harry said. "Not every owl can be as good-looking at you."

His owl's head snapped around.

"You were a bit obvious," Harry told his owl. "Bacon?"

"Harry..." Susan said slowly as the owl took the offered strip of bacon, "are you, I mean... Are you actually having a conversation with your owl?"

"No," Harry said. "Hedwig was just being really obvious." The owl in question glared at him and he said, "What? You were."

Hedwig gave him another glare, then launched herself into the air and flapped away.

"Anyway," he said, "no, I can't talk to owls. I can talk to snakes, though."

The table around him hushed as though hit with a silencing spell.

"What?" Justin asked, not the only muggle-born that looked confused at the preternatural silence that had eclipsed their table. "What is it?"

After a moment Ernie made a disgusted sound and shook his head. "That joke was in really poor taste, Harry."

"Joke?" Justin asked.

"I'll explain later," Ernie promised his friend as conversation at the table began to pick up again.

"You know," Susan said. "I almost believed you there for a moment. Ernie was right, it really was in poor taste."

"I—" Harry began, but he stopped and shrugged. He hadn't meant it as a joke, hadn't even really been thinking about it when he'd said it. Ernie and Susan's reactions reminded him suddenly of Allie's warning, but it didn't stop him from feeling slightly hurt by his friends' reactions.

He pulled the letter out of the pancakes. Written on one side in big block letters was:

READ ME FIRST.

Harry turned it open and found the envelope was sealed with a wax seal of a yellow badger on a black background. He slit it open with a butter knife and pulled out the parchment inside.

DO NOT OPEN THE PARCEL AT THE TABLE
It contains your new Cleansweep 6, but I don't want everybody knowing you've got a broomstick or they'll all want one. Samothrace Capper will meet you tonight on the Quidditch Pitch at seven o'clock for your first training session.

Professor P. Sprout
Head of Hufflepuff &etc.

Harry had difficulty hiding his glee as he carefully refolded the letter and passed it to Ernie.

"A Cleansweep 6," Ernie said, reading the letter. "That's a right good broom, that is." He started to say something more, but hesitated.

Justin wasn't so discreet. "Want to go to the sett and open it up?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

With what seemed like two thirds of Hufflepuff, or at least his year, following him, Harry got up and made his way across the hall. He was stopped short of the doors to the Entrance Hall, however, by Ron.

"I saw the owls," Ron said.

"The entire Great Hall saw the owls," Ernie huffed.

"That's a broomstick, isn't it?"

"If you promise not to tell anyone, I'll explain," Harry said.

"Gryffindor's Honor," Susan added seriously.

Ron's eyes flicked to the girl, and then he slowly nodded. "All right, Gryffindor's Honor."

"Good, c'mon, I don't want to do this here," Harry said.

They managed to get halfway across the Entrance Hall before they were stopped again, this time by Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy seized the package from Harry and felt it.

"That's a broomstick," he said, throwing it back to Harry with a mixture of jealousy and spite on his face. "A year of detentions not enough, Potter? You'll be in for it this time for sure. First years aren't allowed broomsticks."

"A gross misunderstanding," another voice cut in before Ron could jump to Harry's defense.

"Padma?" Harry asked.

"Hullo, Harry," Padma said. She turned to Malfoy, her expression cooling. "You'll find, Malfoy, if you bothered to check the rules, that first years aren't allowed flying brooms."

"What are you talking about?" Malfoy demanded.

"What am I talking about?" she asked. "You're the one saying that Harry's been assigned detention for the rest of the year by Professor Sprout. You don't honestly think she's has that many plants that need to be repotted, do you? You are aware that detentions usually require manual labor without the use of magic, are you not? Brooms charmed to resist spells are not exactly commonplace items inside of a magical castle. If I were Harry, I'd have avoided opening it in the Great Hall in front the entire school too."

Malfoy started to reply, but Professor Flitwick appeared at his elbow, "not arguing, I hope, boys? Ladies?"

"No," Malfoy said. "No, not at all, Professor." He gave Harry a look of unholy glee before whirling around and striding away.

"Yes, well, perhaps the rest of you should be off to your classes?" Professor Flitwick suggested.

"Yes, Professor," Harry said.

Flitwick nodded once and walked away whistling a jaunty tune.

"Morgana," Padma muttered darkly. "Next time make sure Allie's around to do that kind of double-thinking."

"You know?" Harry asked.

"I was there the other day, Harry, remember?" Padma asked crossly. "It wasn't exactly hard to figure out when you got off. Of course none of the rest of my year-mates in Ravenclaw have but I'm firmly of the opinion that it says more about them than it does me. The upper years, of course, don't believe us at all. Say we're exaggerating the catch." She made a sound of disgust.

"What do you know?" Ron asked her, then, before she could answer, he turned to Harry. "You don't really have detentions for a year, do you, Harry?"

"Of a sort," Harry admitted. He led them down into the corridor that led to the Hufflepuff common room.

"We'll wait here and make sure no one overhears," Ernie said.

Harry dragged Ron and Padma down the hall a little further. "Yesterday in flying lessons Cornfoot picked up Neville's remembrall," he told Ron, fishing the device out of a pocket and handing it over.

"We were wondering where it had gone," Ron said. "It fell out of Neville's pocket during his accident and Malfoy picked it up. We, uh..."

"Got in a fight," Padma said. "My sister told me."

"Yeah," Ron said, the tips of his ears turning pink. "We tried to look for it later but couldn't find it."

"Cornfoot threatened to leave it someplace high up, and when I went up after him he tried to throw and smash it against the castle. I, uh, caught it."

"After a truly spectacular fifty-foot dive and plucked it out of the air about a foot above the flagstones," Padma told Ron.

Harry shrugged. "Anyway, the guy Hufflepuff has as seeker would really prefer to be playing chaser, but since they don't have anyone else to play seeker they've been stuck."

"Until now," Padma said.

"Until now," Harry agreed.

"No way, seeker?" Ron asked. "Blimey, you must be the youngest Hogwarts Quidditch player in—"

"About a century," Padma and Harry finished together with him.

"So that really is a—" Ron nodded at the package.

"Yes," Harry agreed. "Cleansweep 6."

"That's a good broom," Ron said.

"I have to get to class," Padma announced.

Harry nodded. "Us too. I'll see you later?"

"Of course."

"I, uh, guess I'll see you later too," Ron said before turning and shuffling down the hall after Padma.

Harry hurried to his dorm room and ripped the paper from the broom and spilled it out onto his bedspread. It lay there; all glistening varnished wood shaft and thick ruler-straight tail made of long twigs. On the shaft, near the very end, inlaid with gold, was written CS-6S.

He stared at it a moment longer, then bolted for class.

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They day passed in a disjointed blur that left Harry thankful for History of Magic and Quirrel's Defense Against the Dark Arts because he knew that he could not have gotten through Potions without making some dreadful mistake that would have resulted in painful, and probably humiliating, injuries that may very well have been uncorrectable. By the time lunch rolled around Ernie and Justin had given up trying to talk with him, and he completely missed the utterly malicious smile of welcome Argus Filch gave him after the meal.

At dinner he allowed himself a few bites for show, then disappeared into the Hufflepuff Settle just long enough to retrieve his broom before heading for the pitch.

There were the expected team locker rooms (each team had their own, clearly identified with the House colors and mascot) and a large ring of tall stands. Inside the stands, the pitch itself was a long oval with ends that narrowed sharply, at each of which stood three spindly poles topped with hoops that reminded him of the plastic things muggle children used to blow bubbles.

Not sure where he was supposed to go he went to the Hufflepuff locker rooms first. He didn't know what to expect, but he certainly wasn't expecting to find a modern muggle locker room with metal lockers fitted with combination locks and perfectly laid tiles and fluorescent lighting. What he found was a room lined with large, old-fashioned, wooden lockers. Each had a name, a position, and a number stenciled on it. The floor was tiled, but not with a boring pattern of one or two colors. Instead an incredible mosaic was set into the floor like something out of an ancient roman bathhouse like he'd seen on a video in primary school.

Harry bent down and ran his hand over it, and was unsurprised to find that the floor was perfectly smooth without any indication of seams between one piece of polished stone or glass and the next. The lighting was bright and constant, and he looked up to find opalescent circles set into the ceiling that glowed gently.

Further exploration revealed a shower room much like those in the dorms, another room with tubs for soaking in hot or cold water, a long room filled with old exercise equipment including a stationary

bicycle, a rowing machine, and what he suspected was an antique mechanical horse that had been charmed to operate on magic.

At the end of the locker rooms nearest the pitch was a largish room filled with comfortable chairs set on several tiers. At the front, filling the bottom tier and maybe a third of the total room, was a model of the pitch. There was another door in this room that he couldn't open, but suspected that it led to the female lockers. Old pennants, uniform robes, and award plaques lined the walls. A wooden rack to hold brooms near a large double-door was empty.

Harry pushed these doors opened and found himself walking out onto the pitch where ten people already stood waiting.

"Harry!" Thrace called him over. "Right on time. What did you think of the locker room?"

"It was nice," Harry said. "Uh...was that actually a—"

"Mechanical horse?" Thrace asked. "Everyone asks about it. All I know is that it was here before Professor Sprout was. Fully operational too, if you're into that thing.

"I know I introduced you to the primaries," she continued, "but I didn't get a chance to introduce you to the Reserves yet. I was hoping to get a new seeker earlier, as it was we had to really shuffle our starting lineup. Thanks to you we could undo that.

"So you know me and Cedric, and Nym."

"Tonks," came the flat response.

Thrace grinned at the older pink-haired girl who'd helped Harry the night before. "We're the starting Chasers, and Cedric is next year's prospective Captain. Mortimer Montgomery and Casper Adams are both fourth years and starting Beaters. Winifred Meles, Fred, Fifth year and starting Keeper."

"I'm just in it for the fun," the girl said. "That's why Ced's next year's Captain, he wants to do this stuff professionally."

"That's the hope at any rate," Cedric said.

"Francis Scott," Thrace continued, indicating a girl about the Weasley twins' age, "is our utility reservist. Our specialty reservists are Dustin Smythwick, Beater."

A large boy with a square jaw nodded mutely to Harry.

"Leland Walther-Higginbotham," Thrace continued, indicating another boy barely older than Harry who was wearing a muggle t-shirt with RMMC over a heraldic device that Harry didn't recognize, but featured what knew to be a mantichore and what looked like an advanced muggle rifle, "is our reserve Chaser. And finally Lucille van Pelt is our second reserve Chaser."

A vaguely annoyed-looking girl with black hair, maybe two or three years older than Harry, gave him an impatient nod.

"No reserve Seeker?" Harry asked weakly.

"Me," Cedric said. "Some of our primaries double as reservist, so I'm reserve Seeker, Mort's a reserve Chaser, and Winnie is a reserve Beater."

"Don't call me Winnie," Fred growled.

"And now that introductions are over, a basic outline of the rules, if you remember from earlier?" Thrace asked.

"Three Chasers on a team, try to put a ball, the quaffle, through the hoops on the other side of the field. Each team gets a Keeper who tries to prevent the quaffle from going through. There is a pair of balls, bludgers, charmed to knock people off their brooms and each team gets two people, Beaters, who try to protect their team and get the bludgers to knock the other team's people off their brooms. There is one very small, very fast ball that is called the golden snitch and that flies around the field. Each team gets one person, the Seeker, who tried to catch the snitch which ends the game and gets the capturing team 150 points," Harry said by rote.

"Excellent," Thrace said. "Let's all get airborne and take a few laps. Harry, you never flew before the other day?"

Harry shook his head.

"Okay then, you follow along after Cedric. Mort, Ghost, you have your wands? Good, you follow after them just in case. Maybe we'll do a spot of racing once we're warmed up if you feel up to it."

"Cedric?" Harry asked.

"Yes?" the older boy asked.

"Well, you mentioned a Cleansweep 6, and that's what I got, but it says CS-6S on the handle," Harry said, pointing to the broom.

Cedric nodded. "Hold a moment, Thrace," he called over to the Captain. "Different players need different capabilities in a broom, Harry. Beaters, for example, need a nice and stable broom so that they can use both arms on their bats if they have to. Keepers don't need a really high top speed because of how close together the hoops are, but they need a really fast acceleration so they can move between them quickly.

"Cleansweep began marketing charm packages that tweak a broom to emphasize various capabilities, such as for Keepers, or Beaters, or general racing, or a number of other things. The base CS-7 is still a better Beater broom, the charm package just makes it more so. The Seeker package has Chaser-level top speed, Keeper-level acceleration, better maneuverability, things like that."

"Oh," Harry said. He mounted his broom, and at Cedric's nod he kicked off and flew up until he was nearly to the level of the goal hoops to join the rest of the team.

"Hey, Harry, come back down for a second," Cedric called up to him.

Startled, and a little hurt, Harry let his broom settle back to the ground.

Cedric got on his own broom, facing Harry. "Can you do that again, slowly this time?"

Frowning in concentration Harry gave the ground a little kick and rode up into the air.

Cedric whistled softly.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Do you always do that?" Cedric asked. "Hold the shaft level while you ascend or descend?"

"Um...I guess so, I mean I don't think about it, I just...want to go higher and so I do," Harry said. "Why?"

"Because most people have to pull back on the shaft a little or press it down a little to change altitude like that," Cedric said.

"Oh."

"There's nothing wrong with it, honest," Cedric said. "It's just a really impressive bit of flying. There's no real advantage to it, but it looks flashy and stuff because most people find it really difficult to do." He waved to Thrace and the seventh year started the team off on a slow circuit of the pitch.

The second and third loops were done at a much quicker speed, and the fourth done at a fast pace still. Cedric, showing off his own ability, rolled inverted to Harry, which Harry just had to try and found that his broom held him comfortably secure to it despite gravity. The older boy laughed, pushing his broom into a half-loop that Harry followed, and then followed him again as Cedric pulled his broom handle-straight up and began to accelerate out of the stadium.

Cedric began to spin slowly around the long axis of his broom, which Harry gamely mimicked, but spinning in the other action. Cedric finally stopped, hanging in the air, so high up that Hogwarts was barely a postage stamp. Harry felt a brief moment of panic and started to slide off the back of his broom, but Cedric grabbed the back of his robes until he could find his seating on the broom while it was perpendicular to the ground.

"Did you notice that you matched my timing on the spins perfectly?" Cedric asked curiously.

"No," Harry said, looking warily at the ground.

"Not uncomfortable?"

"A little," Harry said.

"Probably a good sign," Cedric judged. "Any problems holding it perpendicular?"

"For a moment," Harry said. "Not now. I thought I'd slip off the back end, and then I was. Once I realized that the broom wouldn't let me unless I thought it would..." he shrugged.

"You ready for something a little trickier?" Cedric asked.

"Like what?"

"Like a vertical fall, maintaining orientation of our brooms, slowing at the last moment to come to a perfect landing?"

"What's the worst that could happen?"

"You could fall and Mort and Casper could miss the catch and you ground-dart hard enough that all the magic in St. Mungo's can't save you," Cedric said seriously.

"Why not?" Harry asked.

Cedric grinned, then promptly slid backward towards the ground.

Harry frowned. How, exactly, did one make a broom go back—

The bottom dropped out of the sky as his broom abruptly began to fall.

He struggled with his broom for a moment, trying to accelerate backwards, then realized that he had a perfectly capable source of backwards (relative) acceleration and all he really had to do was hold on and keep the broom vertical. Laughing he added a bit of a right-ward spin. Feeling a bit more secure than he really should have for a person with less than an hour of actual flying time, he pulled his hands off and held them above his head in the classic look-Ma-no-hands gesture.

He managed to hold it for three seconds, for five, but then his broom tipped back on its topside and entered what a muggle would have called a flat spin, and a wizard a maple-seed twirl.

Inverted.

The broom held Harry securely to it, but it didn't do anything to stop gravity from pulling blood towards his head. Nor did the broom do anything to help Harry with the sudden vertigo caused by the sudden assault on his inner ear. He didn't have enough experience to have the muscle-memory instincts get out of the situation he was in, and while the Sorting Hat hadn't been wrong about his intellect he was far more interested in the practical use of knowledge rather than knowledge for knowledge's sake. For someone who would often find himself in life-and-death situations this was not a small thing, but in this situation it left him unable to coldly and logically reason his way out of his current predicament...and the deleterious effects on his senses was only compounding his problem.

He had, in rapid succession, three thoughts. The first was roughly 'oh shit, I'm going to die'. The second was 'I don't want to die'. The third was something vaguely along the lines of 'I don't feel so good'.

Harry lunged for his broomstick's shaft, and not only didn't manage to get it but added an uncontrolled wobble to the spin. He remembered Dudley sticking his arm out the window on the ride to the zoo, and how while going fast the air made his chubby cousin's arm go up or down depending on how he held his hand. Harry tentatively pulled his hands 'down' from where they were dangling 'above' him and slowly reached out—

Only to nearly have his arms ripped from their sockets as the centrifugal momentum pulled them 'away' from his body and added a half dozen spins around the long-axis of his broom to his problems before he allowed them to dangle again and found himself restored to his former set of circumstances. Still, he learned that his hands could change his set of circumstances.

He pulled his arms 'down' again, forcing them down along his sides to keep them from sticking out any further than he had to. Finally he managed to grip the shaft of his stick slightly in front of where he was sitting on it. Keeping a firm grip because he was not at all sure he could get it again if he lost it, he slowly crept his grip on the shaft forward.

It wasn't as far forward as he would have liked, it certainly didn't feel natural—or at least what he thought natural should feel like giving his current situation—but it was what he had to work with. Harry pulled the broomstick back into his body as hard as he could.

The good news was that he was no longer in a flat spin. The bad news was that the new angle made the inverted vertical spin feel even worse. Harry fought against the nausea, plenty of time for him to be sick after he dug a three-foot crater into the dirt.

Still, it had given him an idea, and he continued to pull back on the stick. As the axis of the spin changed slowly from his body towards the long-axis of the broom, the spins became more and more unpleasant as his body—and his head in particular—sped through increasingly large circles.

He shot through the air occupied by the rest of the team in a more or less vertical dive that reminded him unpleasantly of the dive-bombing owl at breakfast. Three or four colored lights that he assumed were spells meant to catch him all missed. Harry leaned into the spin, counteracting it, then went too far and ended up in another spin before he countered that one as well and steadied out after two more spins in the first direction.

The Quidditch Pitch was far too close for comfort but the center point with its big chalk double-rings where he assumed the quaffle would be released was a nice aiming point so he pulled back and suddenly he was right-side up and not spinning at all. Now if only could slow down.

If only he would slow down...

Now would be a good time...

Harry managed to think one last rude word before the ground slammed into his feet with jarring force that lifted him off his broomstick. Nothing seemed broken, or even badly hurt. He managed two staggering steps before the world lurched under his feet and slammed into his hands just before he became reacquainted with his dinner.

"Harry! Harry, are you all right?"

Harry finished what he was doing at tried to roll away, but arms pulled him to his feet.

"Harry, speak to me."

"Urk."

Hands let him go as lunch made its second appearance.

"Move back, give him some room. Cedric don't you dare try picking him up again."

Tonks knelt in front of him. "Don't try getting up yet," she advised, handing him a bottle of water.

"Urgh?" Harry managed to make it a question.

"A bit of personal advice, Harry; don't try standing until the world stops spinning."

Harry managed a sound that was vaguely affirmative, and after several moments of struggle, got the cap off the bottle to rinse out his mouth. He got more of the water on himself in the process, but it was a small price to pay.

Feeling somewhat clean again he decided that Tonks' advice was the best way to go and crawled away from the sick before collapsing onto his back.

"Merlin, Harry," Cedric's madly grinning face was thrust into his sight. "That was so. Bloody. Awesome."

"You almost got him killed!" Thrace screeched. She turned on Cedric. "Do you have any idea the amount of parchment work I would have had to do if he'd managed to kill himself? Not to mention the damage of a Harry-sized hole in the pitch? That was insane!"

"I know," Cedric said, still grinning. "An inverted maple-leaf twist with not an hour on a broom and he manages to make a perfect landing."

"Perfect?" Thrace screamed. "Perfect!"

"Ignore them," Tonks advised. "How are you feeling?"

"Alive," Harry said honestly before giggling, the idea seemed incredibly funny. "I'm alive!" he proclaimed before breaking into laughter.

"He's cracked," Thrace said mournfully.

"He'll be fine," Tonks told her.

"Can you do that again?" Cedric asked.

"Go 'way, Ced, don' wanna talk to you righ' now," Harry said. Then added, "Prob'ly a good thing I got a Seeker broom. Don' know if I coulda stopped it' if it weren' so maneuverable."

"If that hadn't been a 6S he never would have been able to get into one by accident in the first place!" Thrace seethed at Cedric.

"A Nimbus he could have," Cedric disagreed. "Late model Comet, maybe he could have. A standard Cleansweep 6—"

"What do you mean you couldn't stop it?" Tonks asked.

"Fallin'," Harry grunted.

"Harry," Tonks said slowly. "It's a broomstick. It doesn't do a blessed thing unless you want it to."

Harry blinked at her.

"The only reason it was falling was because you thought it was, or should be, falling."

"Do you need to go to the Hospital Wing?" Thrace asked Harry before he could reply to Tonks. She'd turned away from Cedric, argument clearly finished.

"No!" Harry said sharply.

"Yes!" an unfamiliar voice said from somewhere above, er...past him in the direction of his head, said.

"Madam Pomfrey," Cedric said.

"Diggory!" the stranger said sharply. "Getting started early on your newest team-mate, I see."

"I didn't, it wasn't like that!" Cedric protested.

"I just bet it wasn't!" the witch spat. "This—this insane sport and all the reckless people playing it. Sooner or later one of you people will break something that I can't grow back, just you wait and see!"

A witch appeared in Harry's vision. She wore robes that managed to convey the sense of both a nurse's smock and a doctor's coat, and a large white...hat thing that looked sort of like an abstract swan.

"Harry Potter," she said. "Why am I not surprised that you are making your way to my infirmary sooner rather than later?"

"I don't need to go," Harry said carefully.

"Oh no? Then what are you doing lying on the ground rather than trying to kill yourself playing this crazy thing you people call a sport?"

"Jus' resting a moment," Harry said.

"I can just imagine," she said witheringly. "Just give me a moment and I'll conjure up a stretcher for you."

"I can walk," Harry said quickly.

"No, you can't," the nurse-witch said. "That's just shock talking. It would be a wonder you didn't shatter a leg—two legs!— what with that landing. Why, you could have broken your spine, the way you went to the ground. Or maybe you only severely concussed yourself..."

The ground seemed to lift Harry up, and then he settled on something softer, but just as firm as before.

"You, Mister Potter, are going nowhere until I've had a chance to check you over proper in my hospital wing. You will be staying overnight. And if you have any foolish ideas about sneaking off, be

rest assured that I will find out and will take measures to make certain of it."

Chapter 10: The High Lords of Chaos

"In true education, anything that comes to our hand is as good as a book: the prank of a page-boy, the blunder of a servant, a bit of table talk - they are all part of the curriculum."

-Michel de Montaigne-

The next morning Harry awoke in the hospital wing to find a small hill of get well cards and candy on the bedside cupboard, and Thrace, Cedric and Eric Bryce sitting in chairs.

"Took you long enough," Thrace said.

"I'm sorry—"

"It's not your fault," she cut Harry off with an irritated wave of her hand. "I told you to follow Cedric and you did just that. Practices are canceled for you for the next week and a half. Instead you will spend the time, and three hours on Saturdays and Sundays until I tell you different, working one-on-one with Cedric. All the natural talent in the world won't help you if you don't actually have the necessary skills to use it efficiently."

"But the team..."

"The team will be just fine," she said crossing her arms. "It'll give me the chance to shuffle the lineup some and start getting the reserves used to being called in. What will affect the team is the year of detentions you have with Filch."

Thrace shook her head in disgust. "What can any first year do, that'll get him a year of detentions with Filch?"

"It was Allie's idea, actually," Harry said.

"Who?" Thrace asked.

"Is she one of those Gryffindor/Ravenclaw twins you hang with?" Bryce asked.

"No," Cedric said. "She's his friend in Slytherin who came by the other night."

Harry looked at the Prefect. "Um..." he began, "why are, I mean..."

"We always try to have a prefect nearby when one of ours is in the hospital wing," Eric said. "Just in case there is something that you need someone to know or in case something needs to be done."

"Oh," Harry said.

"Do you have anything like that you want to tell me?" Bryce asked.

"No."

"Alright then," he said. He nodded to the other two. "Sam, Cedric, be seeing you."

Harry waited for the Prefect to leave before he turned back to Thrace and continued. "Anyway, Allie...figured it out. Me and the team, I mean. Something about Professor Sprout dancing in her greenhouses and you booking the pitch solid for a week."

"So much for it being a surprise," Thrace muttered.

"No, it is, still, I think," Harry said. "She keeps secrets really well, and, well, she told me that if we wanted it kept a secret I should have gotten some points taken or something. So I, uh, may have told Draco Malfoy that Professor Sprout assigned me a load of extra work for the rest of the year to keep me out of trouble. And when I got the broom yesterday, well, he figured out what it was, but Padma Patil pointed out that brooms charmed to resist magic aren't exactly something a magical castle would have on hand."

"So Ravenclaw knows too," Thrace said unhappily.

"Be fair," Cedric said. "He did pull the catch off in front of the 'claw firsties."

"Padma said that the older years said that they exaggerated the difficulty of the catch," Harry said. "That none of us had enough experience to really judge height, and performance on a broom, or the difficulty of a catch."

"Right, well, I was hoping for a surprise, but I suppose the likelihood of the secret being kept for a couple of months was never really high," Thrace muttered. "And to be far, detentions are a pretty good cover. Okay, Harry, you have a week and a half to master the basics, and Cedric is your flying coach until I say otherwise. Get well and learn fast, because the week after next we start full team practices."

She turned to Cedric, "Teach him, but keep him healthy, Diggory, or you'll discover that only reserve Seeker or no, you are not irreplaceable."

Harry and Cedric watched as she stalked out of the Hospital Wing.

"Oh," Thrace said, ducking back into the room, "There is one more thing. Mr. Potter, you will be seen performing menial cleaning around the castle. Just to keep up appearances."

"I suppose I deserved that," Cedric said when she had left.

"I'm sorry if I got you in trouble," Harry said.

"Thrace was right," Cedric told him. "It wasn't your fault. You followed me so easily I forgot that you had just barely gotten on a broom. Madam Pomfrey says that you can go whenever you are feeling well enough. I had one of your robes brought up and stashed in the cupboard so you don't need to walk through the halls wearing one of those hospital robes."

"Thanks," Harry said.

Cedric nodded. "I suggest eating a light dinner tonight. I'll show you where the kitchens are after practice if you're feeling hungry because this evening the first thing you'll be learning is how to properly pull out of an inverted maple-seed twirl."

"Can we not and say we did?" Harry asked.

"No," Cedric said.

Harry sighed and slumped back in the bed as Cedric grinned wildly.

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After a day spent looking forward to getting to ride his very own broom, Harry found himself gripped by a melancholy that even teaming up with Parvati in Double Herbology to tend merry-golds failed to break. Parvati ended up doing most of the work in that class because whenever Harry got too close, the merry-golds would turn all blue and mopey-looking.

When lunchtime finally arrived he was strongly considering begging off the rest of his classes due to the events of the previous evening and going to bed. His stomach, having not had a really good meal since lunch the day before, took exception to that idea so he reluctantly allowed his friends to drag him down to the Great Hall.

He felt a tingling sensation as he sat down, and after a moment of searching found a spot on the underside of the table that was warm to the touch.

"What is it?" Ernie asked.

"The rune," Harry said.

Ernie frowned, but then his eyes widened and he nodded in understanding.

Lunch was a generally informal affair so they had never seriously considered that the twins would prank it. There were just too many people who would come in early or late instead of everyone sitting down at once. A prank in the food at lunch could be assured to only get a portion of the students. Apparently the twins had gone ahead and pranked it anyway.

Fortunately lunch was not yet served and Harry was able to surreptitiously draw his wand and tap the controlling rune. It chilled briefly, and then there was just smooth wood under his fingers, without a trace of odd temperatures.

Harry helped himself to a chicken salad sandwich from one of the platters, and filled his glass with pumpkin juice and another with milk.

"Look," Justin hissed, kicking him under the table.

Harry looked up and the muggle-born nodded towards the High Table. He turned, and almost choked on his sandwich.

All of the witches on the staff that were present had sprouted magnificently luxurious and incredibly long mustaches and beards that were striped in the colors of all the Hogwarts Houses. The male professors didn't grow facial hair (though Dumbledore's did turn colors to match), but instead grew extra-curly, floor-length tresses that were likewise striped.

"Oh," he said. "Wow. Um..."

"Yeah, look at Professor Snape."

Snape's new hair was not the least bit greasy or oily, but it...puffed from his head, only just managing to keep from being bushy.

"Heh," Harry said, beginning to chuckle.

"Fred and George WEASLEY!" McGonagall shouted in outrage.

"Who, us?" One of the twins protested. "We'd never prank the professors, Professor McGonagall—"

"Not like that," the other said. "Really, you have to believe us."

"I do, do I?" she asked.

"Have you ever known us to do such amateurish work?" the first asked.

"Indeed, at lunchtime?" the other asked. "Not all of the students, or Professors for that matter, are here."

"Unless of course we did it just because other people wouldn't think that we would do it," the other countered. "But that color-change—"

"Strictly low-class work. Far better to give each Head of House their own colors."

"Except Professor Snape, of course, he looks quite fetching in gold and red."

"Fix it," McGonagall seethed. "Now."

"Eh, it'll wear off in a—" The twin speaking stopped abruptly. "Oops?"

"Ten points each from Gryffindor," McGonagall said coldly.

"But we didn't do it!" the other twin protested. "I mean we did, but only to the Houses."

"Gred is right," the first said. "We wouldn't dream of pranking the Professors like this."

"And detention."

"Now really, Professor, have we ever lied to you?" the second asked.

Harry watched as McGonagall raised an eyebrow.

"I mean when it was important?"

He could see Professor McGonagall considering them.

"We didn't do this, Professor," the first said seriously. "We meant it as a harmless prank on the houses, honest we did."

"You are suggesting that some person on persons unknown took a prank on the other houses and switched it so that it targeted the Professors," Professor McGonagall said, idly stroking her beard. "And did it in the Great Hall, just now, without anyone noticing a thing?"

Her hand paused as she realized what she was doing and angrily crossed her arms.

"Yes!" both said.

"We'll even bet a second detention that if you checked you'd find evidence."

"We will?" the first asked.

"Fine," McGonagall said shortly. "But if you are wrong those detentions will be with Professor Snape, and Mr. Filch!"

She turned back towards the Head Table, "Professor Dumbledore. If you would be so kind?"

Professor Dumbledore stood, not trying to hide the fact that he was stroking his own beard which clashed horribly with his robes. He raised his wand in his other hand, swishing it around the Great Hall as he chanted softly.

Harry knew he was doomed. The spell would find the runes that had anchored the switching spells, which would lead to the rune by his seat, the one that controlled the whole thing. He'd have broken the rules again, and this time the expulsion from riding the broom when he wasn't supposed to would catch up and—

Nothing happened.

He was still gaping at the featureless table when Professor Dumbledore turned to McGonagall and said. "I can find no evidence of a switching spell on our food or table service."

"But—"

"Two detentions, each," McGonagall told the twins. "With Professor Snape and Mr. Filch."

"Wow," Justin said in a low voice. "I was sure we were going to be caught."

"Yeah," Ernie said. "So what are we going to do next?"

"Do next?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, what prank are we going to pull off next?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "I guess I never really thought about it." He hesitated, "do you think we should?"

Ernie nodded, "Mum always said that pranks and practical jokes were something of a Hogwarts tradition. Way I see it, the Weasley twins won't be around for forever. Besides, who would suspect us?"

he asked, giving an ironic wave to Hufflepuff table, as he quoted an old joke in the common room that none of them really quite understood.

"If we do this, we're going to need those girls that are friends of yours, and those two people on the Quidditch team," Justin said. "That'll give us access to all four houses, plus some fourth and seventh year magic. I don't know about the two of you but I can't think of any good pranks involving boil-removal potion or turning matchsticks into needles."

The three traded looks.

"Okay then," Harry said. "I'll approach Tonks and Cedric this evening before Quidditch practice, then I'll talk to Padma, Parvati, and Allie. Start coming up with a list of ideas, if you can, and maybe people we can prank?"

"We can do that," Ernie said.

"Alright then," Harry said.

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The melancholy from morning disappeared just as quickly as it had come, and Harry once again found himself passing the day in a blur. He did manage to eat more than he had the day before when dinner rolled around, but mindful of his previous evening's flight it wasn't much more. When Cedric left the table he got up as well and hurried after the older boy out to the Quidditch pitch.

"Ready, Harry?" Cedric asked.

"I think so," Harry said. "I didn't eat a lot, just in case."

Cedric nodded. "Remind me to show you the kitchens after practice. They aren't far from our common room. Just wait until Halloween rolls around, the whole common room is filled with smells from the feast that is baking."

"Wow," Harry said. "So, Halloween is a big deal?"

Cedric nodded.

"Because of, well..." he shrugged uncomfortably.

Cedric looked at him. "Somewhat," he admitted steadily. "But Halloween has always been an important day for us. You'll understand more in a couple of years. It's kind of hard to explain."

"Oh," Harry said.

Cedric showed him where he now had his own wooden locker. A yellow uniform with black trim hung in it, along with guards, gloves, several small boxes, a longer box on its own rack, a broom rack, and several other things he couldn't identify.

"Used to be we wore yellow and black stripes," Cedric said as he went to his own locker. "Thrace changed it when she became captain, said we looked too much like the Wasps—that's one of the professional league teams—and she was sore with them for beating her team in the league finals."

"What are these boxes?" Harry asked as he quickly changed.

"The small ones hold a practice snitch a piece," Cedric said. "Game snitches are charmed to recognize the person who touches them first in case both Seekers grab it at almost the same time. Practice snitches are reusable, though they do wear out, and don't record who catches them. The larger one is a basic broom maintenance kit."

"I'll show you the basics later, but you're going to have to experiment a little. Different brooms respond to shaft-oils in different ways, and it's going to at least partially depend on what you're trying to do."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Well, I've always found that using citrus oil affects maneuverability. Lemon-seed oils makes for a stiffer ride, which helps some in windy weather to avoid being blown off-course, while orange seed oil makes for snappier turns. You'll have to see what various oils do for you and learn to plan accordingly so you don't over-polish your broom."

"Ready?"

"Yes," Harry agreed instantly.

"Good, follow me."

Harry followed Cedric through the shower area and the workout facilities into the multi-level room. The rest of the team was perched in seats as Thrace used her wand to manipulate tiny figures on brooms around the mock-up of the pitch.

Cedric motioned to a pair of seats on the very highest level. "The seven yellow figures represent us, blue for Ravenclaw, red for the Gryffs, green for the snakes."

"So in this case, Slytherin," Harry said.

Cedric nodded. "You see the two yellow figures with Xs under them? Those are the principal players in the play she's demonstrating. The green K is the opposing Keeper, the person the play is against. The other players on both sides have letters based on the position they play."

"What do the bars over and under the Xs represent?" Harry asked.

"This is a variation of the Porskoff Ploy called the K-option-two," Cedric explained. "Usually the move is used to draw off a defending Chaser by having the Chaser with the quaffle go into a climb, and when the opposing Chaser mimics the move, drop the quaffle to the second Chaser below. The bars represent which Chaser goes up, and which is the second one below."

"In this case Thrace wants to do the same thing with the opposing Keeper—the 'K'. The trick is in the timing. The first Chaser has to be in the scoring area, or close enough to it that the Keeper has to honor the threat, then toss or drop the ball to the second."

"The 'option-two' comes from the first Chaser having two options in the play. The first is whether or not to cross into the scoring area. Doing so is more effective at drawing off the Keeper, while not crossing makes the timing of the toss easier since the first Chaser doesn't have to get clear. The second option is that if the Keeper does not honor the first Chaser's threat, the Chaser can keep the quaffle and try to score, hoping that the second Chaser breaks off before entering the scoring area which would result any points being

removed and the other team getting a penalty shot for having two Chasers in the scoring area."

"It sounds complex," Harry said.

Cedric nodded. "We tried this last year, could never quite pull it off. The problem was that the third Chaser has to block at least two other players or it doesn't work. Last year the third Chaser wasn't quite good enough. I want to try a different blocking scheme I came up with over the summer."

"I'm sorry for taking you away from practice," Harry said.

"You're not," Cedric said. "Tonks may have some problems on the ground but she's a first-rate flier. Good enough to get on a professional team as a reservist if she wanted to. Thrace is going to split the team up and practice the blocks on both sides, see if it is practical enough to spend the time making it part of our game book."

He turned his attention to the miniature stadium for a moment. "Remind me to get you a copy of the entire rule book so that you can memorize all of the fouls."

"Are there a lot of fouls?" Harry asked carefully.

"Over seven hundred," Cedric said.

"That's a lot," Harry said with wide eyes.

"Not as many as you might think," Cedric said. He turned back to Harry and explained. "Everyone is allowed to carry their wand onto the field. That's a fundamental right, guaranteed back when people were still scared of muggles hunting them down. But you can't use your wand on any player, broom, ball, equipment, referee, or spectator. So there are a bunch of fouls, such as transfiguring an opposing Chaser into a polecat, that simply aren't called anymore. Then there are a bunch of fouls that hark back to the sport's bloodier days that are still on the books but the situations just don't occur anymore. I don't think it's likely, for example, that you'll try to decapitate the opposing team's Keeper with a broadsword or release a hundred blood-sucking vampire bats from your robes."

"The actual list of fouls that still occur with any regularity comes down to two dozen or so items." Cedric grinned and added, "not that that is going to get you out of having to memorize all seven hundred of them."

Thrace finished up her presentation and the other players began filing outside. Cedric and Harry stood up to follow, but Tonks broke away from Thrace and came back up the stairs towards them.

"Hey, squirt, tell that friend of yours that lunch was bloody hilarious," Tonks said, grinning widely.

"I will, thanks," Harry said. "Um, Ernie and Justin and I were wondering if you'd like to do it again."

Tonks cocked her head to one side and looked down at him. "Who and when?"

"We, uh, haven't decided yet," Harry said.

"I suppose," Tonks said. "Unless I totally throw my N.E.W.T.s I've already got a job locked up, and I suppose sneaking around would be good practice. How about you, Ced?"

Cedric groaned. "If we get caught I can kiss being Prefect good bye."

Tonks shrugged. "So don't get caught."

"So don't get caught,' she says," he muttered. He shook his head and turned to Harry. "Fine. I'm in," he said, "for now. Do you have a place picked out?"

"A place?" Harry asked.

"To conspire," Tonks said sagely. "All good pranksters need a secret lair. Oh, and secret names. That'll make Ced happy since nobody will connect a pranksterish name with Pompous-Prefect-to-be Cedric Diggory."

"I'm not pompous," Cedric objected.

"That's because you aren't a Prefect yet," Tonks said sadly. "A strange thing happens to people who put on that badge, Ced, I thought you knew this. You'll pin that badge on and you'll never be the same. You'll be a shadow, a fragment of your former self. Just look at what happened to Percival."

Cedric and Harry both shuddered. Harry had only met Ron's older brother in passing, but that had been more than enough.

"I'm not sure that Percy wasn't that way to start with," Cedric muttered.

Tonks didn't say anything for a moment, then turned expectantly to Harry. "You seem to have this all thought out. So, lair?"

"Um...no," Harry admitted. "Do you know of any good places?"

"How about one of the three towers?" Tonks suggested.

"Three towers?"

Cedric nodded slowly. "There are twenty two towers—or possibly twenty-three, nobody is quite certain. I'm not talking about the normal towers that are part of the castle walls and such, I mean the tall things that, well, tower above the school. Most of them have known entrances, even if they aren't all used. But there are three that, to the best of my knowledge, nobody knows the way inside. Apparently I was mistaken." He looked at Tonks.

"I was thinking we could just use our brooms to fly up and find a way out from inside," Tonks admitted. "After practice?"

"I guess," Cedric said reluctantly. He shook his head. "We're wasting time. Let's go get airborne."

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Harry spent the next hour and a half following Cedric through various maneuvers at steadily increasing speeds. Towards the end of it Cedric led him well above the stadium, and with Harry following in a conventional dive, demonstrated how to first get out of a standard maple-seed twirl, and then how to get out of an inverted one. When the rest of the team broke up to head to the locker rooms,

Tonks flew over and together they spent another half hour teaching Harry how to see not only where a flier was, but predict where he would be and how to avoid him without losing his course and only a minimum of speed.

With light fading fast they landed and quickly showered and changed, before taking their brooms and flying towards the castle.

Cedric pointed out Gryffindor Tower and the Tower of Ivory and Silver (its official name), Ravenclaw Tower (which everyone knew it by), or the Tower of Knowledge (as the snobbier Ravensclaws called it). Tonks pointed out the North Tower where Divination classes were held and the Divination Professor, an "old bat" named Trelawny, lived. The tallest tower, the flat-roofed Astronomy Tower, Harry already knew from his lessons there.

Cedric led them to the central-most tower in Hogwarts, a high, spindly tower made of stone that was so cunningly fitted together Harry couldn't feel a seam. This extended even to the windows, or rather, a distinct lack thereof.

The second tower was an elegant spire not far from, and taller than, Ravenclaw tower. Unlike the first tower it did have windows, but they were black, impossible to see through, and equally impossible for Cedric or Tonks to charm open.

The third tower took some work to find. In the end they had simply started flying circuits around Hogwarts from the inner-most towers to the outer most while Tonks and Cedric slowly identified each one and how to enter it. The tower was nondescript bordering on shabby. Not particularly tall, not particularly wide, the tiles on the roof in need of repair or at least a good scrubbing. It was easily overlooked, and even once they had focused on it Harry's eyes kept slipping away from it.

One floor seemed entirely surrounded by windows, one of which they found open. Tonks and Cedric flew inside without problem, and Harry followed at a more sedate pace. It was dark inside, and he had to land by feel and instinct more than sight. It only got darker as Cedric closed the window and charmed the windows black before conjuring a small ball of light. He conjured another for Harry and demonstrated how to control it with his wand as Tonks cast a spell that caused her wand to flare like a torch.

"Bit of weather damage," Cedric said. "Nothing we can't fix, I imagine."

It was a great deal more than 'a bit', Harry thought. Two ruined couches, a number of ruined chairs, ruined tables, several books that had turned into a puddle of rotting paper by rainstorm and snow, piles of leafs blown in by the wind and left to decompose into dirt...the list was endless.

Tonks did something and there was a horrible screeching as a spiral wrought-iron staircase descended from the ceiling. They trooped up one at a time, conscious of the shaking and the groans of the staircase. The top room had come through without any of the damage from below, but there was an incredibly thick coat of dust over everything. There were a couple of old chairs in the center, along with study desks. Bookshelves lined the low walls surrounding the chamber, and one section of roof looked like it was supposed to be able to slide aside.

"There was probably a telescope here," Tonks said.

"What makes you say that?" Cedric asked.

She pointed at the ceiling. "My dad took me to a muggle observatory once. Said they made better telescopes than we do. It had an opening like that to stick the telescope out of, and the whole thing could turn to look at different parts of the sky."

"Well...I suppose it could make a convenient place to fly into and out of, if we could make it work from outside and didn't use it in bad weather," Cedric said.

"Or when people would notice," Tonks added. "Wish I had this my fifth year, would have made studying for the Astronomy O.W.L. a lot easier."

"There is that," Cedric said with a nod, clearly happy about the idea.

They decided to check out the books later and trooped down the staircase one by one. A second staircase ran along the outside wall and circled down.

Cedric led them down to find the stair ended in a short hall with two doors on either side. Each had a room filled with old furniture badly in need of either repair or disposal. A more conventional set of stairs was at the end of the hall, all they worked their way down through three more levels of similar design. Some with fewer rooms, some with more. Some of the rooms had clearly designed purposes including a store room for potions and another for potion ingredients, both of which flanked a much larger room that was clearly a potion laboratory. Others were entirely empty and just needed a really good scrubbing.

They didn't find any more windows, but there were the usual sconces, torches, lanterns and lamps. Cedric had wanted to light them, but Tonks had pointed out that they were supposed to be 'sneaky', and that there would be a time for cleaning everything up and lighting all the lamps and such later.

Finally they arrived at a flight of stone stairs that led down to an iron-bound oak door. There was a large iron plate with a keyhole in it, but no key, and an iron ring that served as a handle. Bolts at the top and bottom of the door, one set on each side, were slid into the stone walls as an extra safety precaution. In the center of the door, a bit above Harry's height, was a small rectangular section that could be slid aside to see who was on the other side of the door.

"Well now we know why nobody ever got in here," Tonks said as she used her wand to slide back the upper bolts as Cedric did the same with the lower ones. Unlike the folding iron spiral staircase or many of the other doors they had tried to open, the bolts slid back cleanly and without a squeak. Tonks pulled the door open. "Now we just have to figure out where—"

She pitched forward, and both Cedric and Harry grabbed onto the back of her robes.

"Gah," she said, pulling away from them. "Why don't you two just choke me next time?"

"Or we could just let you fall," Cedric said, gesturing the light-ball through the door ahead of them. "Looks like one of the galleries in the upper walls."

Harry followed them through the door and looked around. Suits of armor stood at tidy intervals down both sides of the long hall. After every third set of armor was a gargoyle perched on a plinth. Shields and weapons hung on the walls, all looking bright and shiny...and very, very sharp.

Harry turned as Cedric started to pull the door closed. "Wait!" he blurted.

"What?"

"Look at the door," Harry said.

"What about it?" Tonks asked.

"There's no keyhole on this side," Harry said. "Why would there be a keyhole on the inside but not the outside?"

"Because it only locks from the inside?" Cedric suggested.

"That's what the bolts are for," Harry disagreed. "They'd be better than an ordinary lock, wouldn't they?"

"You have a point," Tonks said suspiciously. She waved her wand over the keyhole and chanted for a moment. "Well," she said finally. "There is some kind of magic on it, but I don't recognize it. It probably keys off magic somehow."

"Keys off magic?" Harry asked.

"Recognizes a specific magical signature," Tonks said. "Sort of like the password that guards some of the other common rooms, only with magic instead of words."

"I wonder..." Harry muttered, then stuck his wand in the keyhole. Nothing happened. Disappointed he tried to pull out his wand only to find it was stuck fast. "My wand's stuck," he said.

"What did you think was going to happen?" Tonks said.

"Well Olivander said that every wand was different, I was just thinking to myself what would every witch or wizard carry that has a one-of-a-kind magic to it?"

"That's a good idea," Tonks said nodding slowly.

"Harry," Cedric said. "It's a keyhole, did you try turning it?"

"Um...no," Harry said. Feeling rather foolish he twisted his wand and felt a very heavy thunk.

Please select a password.

"Did it do anything?" Cedric asked.

"I felt something move, sort of like what you'd feel turning a key with a heavy lock," Harry said.

Please select a password.

"And my wand's still stuck, but now a voice is asking me to select a password.'

"A voice is asking you to select a password?" Tonks asked dubiously.

Please select a password.

"Yeah, sort of like the Sorting Hat spoke. I can hear it up here," Harry said, tapping the side of his head.

"Well, try setting a password," Cedric said.

Please select a password.

Harry thought for a moment, recalling the shelf full of books in Dudley's second bedroom that his cousin had never even touched. He hadn't been allowed into that room all that often, but he'd been allowed in often enough over the years to clean it and unlike the toys, Dudley never seemed to notice if one of the books was misplaced.

The password is: 'What I tell you three times is true.'

There was another heavy thunk and then his wand slid free of the lock.

"Did it work?" Harry asked.

"I don't see a keyhole, but maybe you just have to touch where the keyhole should be," Cedric said. "Let's close the door and try it. If it doesn't work we'll just have to fly up and try it again."

Harry shrugged and stepped into the gallery so that Tonks could push the door closed. From the other side came the sound of the bolts slamming back into place.

"Okay," Tonks said. "What's the password."

"The password is: 'What I tell you three times is true.'"

Cedric gave him a puzzled look as Tonks mouthed the short phrase before breaking out into a smile.

"Just the place for a snark! The Bellman cried, as he landed his crew with care," Tonks said slowly. "Supporting each man on the top of the tide by a finger entwined in his hair."

"Just the place for a snark! I have said it twice, that alone should encourage the crew," Harry quoted happily. "Just the place for a snark! I have said it thrice..."

"And what I tell you three times is true!" both finished in a rush.

"What are you two talking about?" Cedric asked.

"Muggle story, my dad was a fan of the author," Tonks said. "I have a copy of his complete works if you want to borrow it." She turned back to the iron plate where the keyhole should have been and touched it with her wand. "What I tell you three times is true."

Nothing happened.

"Drat," Tonks said. "And it would have been perfect too."

"Maybe it's only keyed to Harry's wand?" Cedric asked. "Harry, you try it."

Harry took a step up to the door. "Hey, I see a keyhole."

"Really?" Tonks asked. "Huh, good call, Ced."

Harry stuck his wand in the keyhole. "What I tell you three times is true."

The bolts slammed back and he pulled the door open.

Cedric stuck his wand into the keyhole on the inside and twisted his wand, but nothing happened.

"A one use door?" he asked.

"Kind of big, don't you think?" Tonks returned. "Harry, if you would again?"

Harry stuck his wand into the interior keyhole and twisted it.

"See?" Tonks asked. "Hey, now there's an exterior one as well. I wonder..." she stuck in her own wand on the exterior hole and twisted it. A moment later the door spat her wand back out. "Try closing it and let's see if it works."

Harry stepped into the short passage before the staircase leading up into the tower and pulled the door closed. He watched as all the bolts immediately slid back into place. Nothing happened for a moment, but then the bolts slid back and Tonks pulled the door open and grinned at him from the gallery.

"Now do Ced's wand," she told him.

Harry stuck his wand back in and Cedric did the same on the outside of the door, and when the door spat out Cedric's wand they repeated the test.

"So now we have a hideout," Tonks said. A clock began to chime somewhere far off.

"Curfew," Cedric said.

"Don't you wish you'd been sorted into Gryffindor?" Tonks asked. "We could have just flown to the tower, then."

Cedric grimaced and started down the gallery, Tonks and Harry following after him.

"Hey, Ced?" Tonks asked after half a minute or so.

"Yes?"

"Do you know where we are?"

"Not really, why?"

"I just thought it funny we're walking down this hall with our brooms. I mean, practice is over, right?"

"Yes," Cedric said slowly.

"So why are we in this hall with our brooms?" Harry asked.

Cedric stopped, turned to look at Harry, and started to reply, only to pause. "I don't know. I remember staying after the rest of the team had gone in to the locker rooms, we must have too because we aren't wearing Quidditch robes."

"Then what are we doing in this hall?" Tonks asked. "It certainly isn't on the way to the sett."

Harry turned and started walking back the way they had come.

"Harry, where are you going?" Cedric asked.

"Look, the last thing I remember is flying around dodging Tonks who was trying to get in my way," Harry said. "I want to see where we came from."

"Except that way is a dead end," Tonks said. "Look, there's a big wall."

"Yes," Harry called back, "but we came from this way, didn't we?"

"I think so?" Tonks asked uncertainly.

Harry shook his head and turned back. "Nothing there," he reported.

"Harry," Cedric said slowly, having watched Harry as he walked down the hall. "You didn't reach the wall."

"Yes I did," Harry said with a frown. "There's a pair of gargoyles with a suit of armor between, and a couple of shields on the wall." He turned back and looked. "See?"

"You didn't reach the wall," Tonks said. "Ced and I watched you. And I'm pretty sure those weren't there before."

"Really?" Harry asked. "Are you sure?"

"No, not really," Tonks said. "But I thought the wall was blank before." She looked at Cedric, but the younger student shrugged back.

"I didn't notice," Cedric admitted.

The two older students traded looks.

"What?" Harry asked. "What is it?"

"Something is playing with our perception," Cedric said. "Aversion wards, maybe, or perhaps a localized memory charm. There's probably a good reason for them."

"Like what?" Tonks asked.

Cedric frowned but didn't reply.

"Right then, I'm with Harry on this," Tonks decided. "I want to see where we came from." She turned and marched towards the wall, wand flicking angrily before her. Halfway there she turned back. "No," she called. "Nothing there."

"Tonks, you never made it to the wall," Cedric called back.

Tonks stopped. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Cedric said.

"Well the heck with that," she said and began to walk backwards.

"That's a really bad idea, isn't it?" Harry asked in a low voice.

"Where she is concerned, definitely," Cedric said in the same tone. "What if something important, or dangerous, is down there?"

"Like what?"

"Like the forbidden corridor."

Harry frowned. "That's not where near here...is it?"

"No," Cedric agreed. "But—"

"And anyway, this is the wrong hall to get to it."

"You're sure?"

"We, uh, ended up in the corridor the other night trying to avoid Filch," Harry admitted.

"Merlin, please tell me you didn't," Cedric groaned.

Harry shrugged.

"I suppose I can forget being Prefect next year if we go through with this," Cedric said.

"What do you mean, 'if', Ced?" Tonks called back to them.

"When," Cedric sighed. After a moment he turned expectantly to Harry. "Well?"

"What?" Harry asked defensively.

"So what was in there?" Cedric asked.

"A giant three-headed dog and a trap door."

"The dog must be guarding the door," Cedric said. "Tonks, stop, you're almost—"

Tonks stopped, or rather her feet did. The rest of her body kept moving, and there was a startled yelp as she fell backwards through

the wall which rippled in response but remained smooth and hard-looking.

"Tonks!" Cedric shouted, running down the gallery towards the wall with Harry right behind him.

"I'm fine," Tonks' voice echoed back at them. "No need to make a big deal about it, sheesh."

"Er, Tonks?" Harry asked as they stopped before the wall.

"Ow," Tonks muttered. "What is it?"

"There's this wall."

"What wall?" Tonks asked.

Cedric held up a hand and pressed it against the wall. "It feels solid."

"Funny, Diggory, really funny," Tonks said.

"No wait, Cedric, do that again," Harry said.

Cedric pressed his hand against the wall. "Am I supposed to be feeling for something in particular?"

"Your hand isn't touching the wall," Harry said. "It's pressed against the air just above it."

"Ha-ha," Tonks said. "Joke's over."

"We're serious, Tonks, we can't see y-ah!" Cedric jerked back as a hand appeared from the wall, a solitary finger extended to poke him between the eyes.

Another hand reached out, grabbed the front of Harry's school robes, and pulled him into the wall.

"Tonks?" he asked.

"Wotcher, Harry," she grinned at him. "Got Ced good, did I?"

Harry frowned, remembering the tower and its weird lock. "Cedric, grab my hand," he said, sticking a hand out. Cedric grabbed it, and Harry pulled a reluctant Cedric through whatever magical barrier had stuck him on the other side.

"If we have to go through that every time, maybe this place isn't going to work out so well," Cedric said.

"Only one way to find out," Tonks said. She turned and walked halfway down the gallery, then turned and slowly walked back. "C'mon. The aversion charm and wall are still there, but as long as you keep them in mind they aren't all that intense."

Harry and Cedric each tried it, then all three of them did it together.

"I think it got easier the second time," Harry said.

"Me too," Tonks said. "Not sure if we're just getting used to it, or if there's something more complex in the works."

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Despite what he had told Justin and Ernie, Harry found himself forced to wait until Friday night before he could get the twins and Allie alone long enough to explain what they wanted to do and about the tower they had found. Parvati had been taken with the idea right away, and had begun to think of rumors she could start to deflect attention even before her sister or Allie could respond to the idea. Padma had also agreed, albeit reluctantly, but Allie had surprised Harry by refusing.

"It isn't you, or the general idea, I have a problem with," she had told Harry, "or even that you have friends that you want in on it. The problem is that eight people is really too many. It's what almost got us in trouble the other night."

Harry had found himself not knowing how to respond to that, but Parvati had quickly pointed out that there was no reason why they all had to go together on every prank, and Padma had added that there were a lot more possibilities with the two upperclassmen as well as having people from each house.

So one Saturday morning in late-September, Hogwarts was treated to a very rare scene as Harry led a coalition of first-years from all four houses and a fourth-year and seventh-year from Hufflepuff, down one of the seldom-visited galleries that filled the center of Hogwarts' walls. Together Harry, Cedric, and Tonks had gotten them through the aversion field and wall illusion, and then Harry had used his wand to key the other first years' to the door.

"It's very dirty," Padma observed as they entered the first level. She opened one of the doors, stuck her head inside, and then sneezed explosively.

"It will take a bit of cleaning," Cedric agreed. "I'm not sure if you can handle cleaning charms yet, but I know where Filch hides the magical cleaning supplies. We can just grab all the animated feather dusters and let them fly loose for a couple of days. Same for the bristle brushes though we'll need to come up with something to keep their soapy water fresh."

"I'm going to need to take a careful look at those potions and supplies," Tonks said.

"It looked like they were under a preservation charm that held up well," Allie told her. "But I agree. We'll definitely want to get rid of all the plant-base material. Preservation spells may keep them from decaying but they just don't keep things properly fresh. The dried stuff should still be good, though."

"You know a lot about potions?" Tonks asked.

"A fair bit," Allie said.

"We're going to need new furniture," Harry said as they reached the main room.

"I know where we can get some," Tonks said.

"Where?" Cedric asked.

"Staff room," Tonks said. "They have the most comfortable couches..."

"How would you know that?" Ernie asked.

"Because, Mr. Macmillan," Snape's head sneered from where it had suddenly sprouted from Tonks' neck, "I know everything." His face and greasy hair melted back into Tonks' smiling face and bubblegum-pink hair.

"Blimey, you're a metamorphmagus," Ernie said.

"A who-what?" Justin asked.

"A what-who," Padma corrected.

"Who-what-what?" he asked.

"What?" Tonks asked.

"Who-what," Justin repeated. He gestured to Padma, and added seriously, "what who?"

"Stop it," Cedric said.

"What?" Justin asked innocently. Then held up his hands as Ernie made a threatening gesture, "Sorry. So what is a metamowhatsit?"

"A metamorphmagus," Ernie repeated. "A person who can change themselves into anyone else, real or imagined."

"Let me get this straight," Justin said slowly, turning to Tonks. "You turned yourself into one of the Professors, just so that you could try out the couches in the staff room?"

"Not just that," Tonks said with a careless shrug. "But yeah, basically."

"Brilliant," Parvati said. "We can have our own Weasley twin on cue."

"No we can't," her sister disagreed. "Everyone else in the school already knows. Don't they?" she asked Tonks.

"Pretty much."

"Besides," Harry said. "Are those two ever seen apart?"

"Not often," Cedric told him.

"How complete is the transformation?" Allie asked suddenly.

"I can pretend to be a different professor if that's what you're asking."

Allie shook her head. "I mean, are you re-arranging soft tissue to take on the appearance of bone structure, or are you actually changing your bones as well?"

"The latter," Tonks said carefully. "There are limits on how much I can change my internal bits, but I can change proportions fairly easily so I can be taller or shorter and whatnot. I'm pretty much fixed as far as mass goes. Why?"

Allie shook her head, "just a stray thought."

"I can't say that I care much for the idea of being a thief," Justin said.

Harry nodded in agreement, "Justin has a point."

"Fair exchange is no robbery," Allie countered.

"What she said," Tonks added. "We can always leave these behind, or I could transfigure some new ones. Maybe tie-dyed colors?"

"Tie-dye?" Cedric asked.

"It's a type of color pattern used by some muggles," Tonks explained, gesturing with her wand at one wall. A swirl of yellow and black appeared on it.

"House colors," Cedric said nodding slowly as Tonks canceled the charm. "Yeah, I like that idea."

"We're going to need a really big coming-out prank," Parvati said. "Maybe we can do that to everyone's robes?"

"Too much," Padma said. "Especially for a prank this early in our careers, but something we can definitely work our way up to. Let's just swap house colors for now."

"Swap one color," Ernie said. "Give the Gryffindors our black, give Slytherin their gold, and give the Ravenclaws their silver."

"That's a start of a prank," Allie said. "What else, the Professors too?"

"No," Harry said. "Them we give all of the house colors, but we make them stripes or polka-dots or something. Maybe give each of them something too? Something witty."

"I know the Slytherin upper years say that Professor Sprout has her classes doing a lot of repotting," Allie noted. "Maybe a potted plant charmed to plant pots?"

"Now that's funny," Tonks said. "And Snape can get a cauldron charmed to talk back at him. What about Flitwick?"

"We can come up with something later, the other Professors too," Cedric said.

"We'll also need a song," Parvati said. "Something to introduce us as...well, pranksters 'cause I don't want everyone to know I am the one doing it, but so that the Weasleys aren't getting the credit. For that we're going to need a name. It'll also keep the Twins from targeting us."

They traded looks.

"She's right," Cedric said at last. "But I'm drawing a blank. Any of you?"

Tonks shook her head and Allie frowned.

"Tonks, didn't you say something about your father wanting you to cause a little chaos at Hogwarts?" Harry asked after several minutes' worth of thought.

Tonks nodded. "He was something of a prankster when he was here. Nothing big, not like the Weasley twins, but he pulled a few."

"Well how about that?" Harry asked. "Causers of Chaos?"

"Causers?" Parvati asked in dismay. "Is that really the best we can do?"

"Lords," Justin said. "The High Lords of Chaos." He swept his hand out, "and this is our foreboding Tower of Turmoil."

"Very nice," Tonks said, nodding admiringly. "Not sure about the 'foreboding' part, it has a sinister ring to it, but I like 'the High Lord of Chaos'."

"How about just the Tower of Turmoil," Padma suggested, "and we can all take names that alliterate like the Primary Punster."

"You can use that if you want," Allie said, "but I, for one, intend to avoid using my initials."

Padma glared at her briefly before turning back to the others. "I'll come up with a list we can pick off of if you can't come up with ones of your own. I'll make extras, we can tag some smaller pranks with other names to throw off estimates of our size."

"Next," Allie said. "I think there is one last thing we have to do before we start cleaning."

"And that is?" Cedric asked.

"We need to pick a First Lord of the High Lords of Chaos," Allie said. "My chief concern was that we'd have too many people running around, getting in each others' way and repeating pranks. We need someone to coordinate our pranks so we don't end up all doing nearly the same thing or at around the same time."

"She's right," Padma agreed. "We need someone who will push us to do better when we lag, and help us to achieve our fullest potential. Who will encourage us and lead us to wisdom. Who will provide us with—"

"We get the idea," Tonks said with a frown. "Heard something like that before, have you?"

Padma blushed. "There, um, might have been a speech by the Prefects our first night."

"I nominate Harry Potter for the position as the First Lord of the High Lords of Chaos," Cedric said. Everyone turned and looked at him.

"Ced?" Tonks asked. "Have you cracked? I mean, we haven't even really pulled any pranks of our own yet, just redirected one of the twins...not that I didn't fall off the bench laughing."

"No I'm serious," Cedric said. "Most of us are here because of him, right? Our connections to him, dorm-mates, teammates, friends... He should be our First Lord."

"My Lords and Ladies," Justin said, "We have a motion on the floor. Harry Potter has been nominated to be our First Lord. Will any second the motion?"

"Can I de-nominate myself?" Harry asked.

"No," Padma told him, then nodded to Justin. "Seconded."

"But I don't want to be First Lord," Harry said.

"Precisely why you're best for the job," Justin told him. "The power of any kind is much too important to be left in the hands of anyone who truly wants it."

"My Lords and Ladies, the motion has been seconded. Are there any other nominations for the post of First Lord?"

"Yes," Harry said quickly. "I nominate, uh, Elissa Blackthorn."

Allie made a disgusted face. "Pass, and don't think I won't forget that, Harry."

"No?" Justin asked in the same formal tones as he ignored Harry, though his wide grin spoiled the effect. "In that case I move that nominations be closed."

"Seconded." Allie said.

"So moved, nominations for the post of First Lord of the High Lords of Chaos have ended and no more will be accepted."

"My Lord," Tonks said with a wide grin. "I move that we vote on the matter of filling the post of First Lord."

"I move that we re-open nominations," Harry said. Once again Justin ignored him.

"My Lords and Ladies, we have a new movement on the floor, will any second it?"

"Seconded," Ernie said.

"So moved," Justin said. "We shall now vote on each candidate in turn. The candidates with the most members approving shall be our First Lord. My Lords and Ladies, please express your approval of a candidate by saying 'yea'. Please express your disapproval by flapping your arms and clucking like a chicken. Abstaining from this vote is not pleasing to the High Lords."

"My Lords and Ladies, your vote please. All in favor?"

"Yea," came seven hands.

"Opposed?"

"No, uh-uh, no-way," Harry said.

The others stared at him. He sighed and tucked his thumbs into his armpits and flapped his arms briefly. "Cluck, cluck."

"My Lord," Justin told Harry, "your chicken impersonation was most pathetic. Truly you have set a low bar for us to try and crawl under." He turned back to the rest. "My Lords and Ladies, the votes being seven for and one against, the motion has carried. Harry Potter has been elected by landslide vote to be the First Lord of the High Lords of Chaos."

"I don't want to be First Lord," he said a bit petulantly, then sighed. "Fine. Have it your way. Let's start cleaning. Cedric, you said you knew where supplies are?"

"Sure, why don't you and your dorm-mates come with me," he said.

"I'll show the girls some cleaning charms," Tonks said.

"Excuse me?" Padma asked.

Tonks shrugged. "We didn't learn about them 'til fourth year or so. If you can do them, the boys can learn when they get back."

"Fine," Padma said.

"But only if Allie doesn't get to try," her sister added. "She's a menace."

"Oh come one, it can't be that bad," Tonks said, rolling her eyes.

"Did you ever see someone set fire to stone before?" Parvati asked.

"No," Tonks said. "Seriously?"

Padma and Parvati traded looks, then both began to nod slowly in perfect time with the other in a decidedly creepy parody of Fred and George Weasley.

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In his tower office Albus Dumbledore felt a prickling sensation on the back of his neck and looked up. Nothing was out of place. Fawkes slept with his head under one wing. The Sorting Hat sat on its shelf. The portraits of the various former Headmasters and Headmistresses continued to softly snore. The vast collection of magical instruments—and more than a few muggle curiosities that had been charmed into perpetual motion—continued to puff and spin and do all the other little things they were designed to do.

Everything was alles in ordnung, as a very old friend of his had once said.

All was in order.

The prickling sensation didn't fade.

The break-in at Gringotts was troubling, but only proved that he was correct in moving the stone. That Hagrid had managed to tell someone what he was doing was regrettable, but the Patils were fine people and everyone else who had over-heard was now in

Hogwarts. The girl was some concern, but the Stone wasn't the kind of thing that would interest her. The Thorne's had more gold than she could hope to spend in a dozen life-times. Similarly the temporary life-extending properties of the Stone would prove slight temptation compared to the powers she would possess in a few short years...and those she already had access to. The Panacea the Stone offered would likely be its most tempting ability, but while it could cure any illness it could not remove something that one naturally possessed. Her grandmother might benefit from it, but the bad feelings between the Thorne Matriarch and her Heir were the stuff of legends.

Or they would be if someone, or some ones, hadn't gone to great lengths to keep those feelings concealed from the magical world.

That he had not yet managed to acquire the final piece of the defenses was somewhat troubling, but all should be in order by the new year. Even without it, the other defenses were nothing to laugh at. That music would make Fluffy sleep was the kind of incidental knowledge that one learned from long exposure with an animal and was almost impossible to learn without being told, and since the break-in a few nights previous the corridor had been heavily spelled to resist active magic inside of it.

That, of course, was only a temporary measure. By the end of the month the corridor would become a magical null-area. It was an idea he'd taken from his attempt to track Harry to the first place the Thorne girl had taken him. Once the null-zone was in effect it would be impossible to magically subdue Fluffy or to re-open the door with magic. The danger if a student were to enter the corridor would likewise be increased, but that could not be avoided.

As for the rest of the traps...

The properties of devil's snare were learned in a basic first-year herbology class, tested at the end of the year, and then something that the vast majority of wizards and witches went through their lives without contemplating ever again. It wasn't even on the O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s, though he never understood why not. Only a few rare, especially complex potions required devil's snare parts, and none of the potions were of the sort brewed by people who would be interested in the Stone.

Filius' keys were charmed against summoning and would take a very skilled broom-rider to capture. Indeed, anyone who attempted to use normal magic would be attacked by the keys which would transfigure themselves into winged knives. Spells attempted on broomsticks would cause the brooms to flare out of control and beat their riders into unconsciousness against the walls and ceiling. Even should someone manage to get through those doors, the tiny snag of metal that had been charmed out of sight would get a blood sample of anyone who opened the doors. Should the Stone be stolen he would at least have an idea of who did it.

Like Filius' flying keys, Minerva's chessboard was much more dangerous than a casual inspection would reveal. A player making the wrong move would be lucky to only be hurt. Should they try to violate the rules and use magic both sides would quickly turn against the fool and the weapons all of the giant chessmen carried were quite functional.

It would take a skilled player to get across that chessboard, and unlike in regular wizard's chess, the pieces would not help or offer advice to the person controlling them. Given the quality of modern pieces such help was of dubious nature at best. But the oldest sets, passed down through the old magical families, could have won Waterloo for Napoleon, had he had a set.

And then there were Severus' potions. Those fortunate enough to survive their way past the challenges posed to wizardly skills would find themselves presented with a logic problem. At best logic was something that many wizards and witches struggled with, at worst it was a potentially dangerous distraction as far too many magical things could not be logically reasoned without at least one explosion.

There was a reason, after all, why the two most popular places for a wizard to have his laboratory was in the upper-most room of the most remote tower, or a dark sub-subbasement.

Thinking about it now he wondered if he shouldn't have let Severus go ahead and put poison in all of the ones except the potions to go forward and back. He hadn't at the time, hoping to spare a poor fool his life, but wasn't a fast-acting poison preferable to the Black Flames if they chose the wrong vial?

He set the thought aside and considered the last protection. Quirinus' troll. A strong foe, certainly, and Quirinus had chosen a particularly imposing specimen. Still, it was not the choice Albus was certain the young man would have made three years before. Even a year at the normally sedate Muggle Studies post so Charity could spend a year doing research and observations for her Master of Muggle Relations, had failed to calm the poor man.

But other than that...nothing. Nothing in the Daily Prophet to arouse suspicion, nor any of the foreign papers he regularly read. Even the Quibbler and Telford Tattler were quiet.

The prickling sensation returned and Albus Dumbledore resisted the urge to rub his eyes and sigh. That prickling sensation meant Trouble, and if the world was quiet it meant that the Trouble was inside the very halls of Hogwarts.

The Weasley Twins were Up-To-Something...

Again.

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